

FUSIT Spiritual Journey Archive Project: Summer Sermons, 2022

8. *Adrift*

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Opening Poem by John Roedel: “When the World Goes Mad”

When the world goes mad
Be wildly kind to everyone, everyone, everyone
You can't control much
But you can control how you treat others
In these breaking news heartbreak times
When nothing feels certain
Let raw kindness be a certainty
Allow your compassion to become a North Star
Stamped up in the sky
For others to follow home

The Reading is from *All Along You Were Blooming* by Morgan Harper Nichols

When you find yourself falling into a pit of anxiety, remember the ladder of hope that reminds you there is no reason to be afraid. There is still a way out of this, and you are still capable- not perfect, but capable and you have permission to try to climb again. Even if your hands shake, and your knees are weaker from the fall, you can trade your fears of tomorrow with hope for today: courageous decision to climb on anyway out of the pit of anxious thoughts.

Over the years, I have found myself in unanticipated situations where I lacked tools to fully comprehend and deal with the reality of that point in time. The feel of being adrift without anything to grab to steady myself. Sometimes those events are all consuming of my mental and physical energy and sometimes they are for just a portion of my life's work but nonetheless

confounding with no clear direction of how to proceed. I want to believe that all have these times in their lives, and when asked to share what I have learned and what I am still struggling with, I found it interesting that this presentation title of “Adrift” caused several congregants to ask me what will be my focus, as “adrift” can fit with so many things. And maybe that is the point. For me adrift is a human condition and maybe only a perception when, unexpectedly, we feel alone, abandoned, or isolated. This can occur within us or the environment around us, at our work, or the in the organizations we are connected to.

I’ll begin by sharing a couple of traumatic events in my life that made me feel hopelessly adrift. After I graduated from college, I took a job with Corning Glass as an engineer first working on TV product development and then heading process engineering at a glass plant manufacturing envelopes for all shapes of light bulbs. My five-year-old daughter drew a picture of my tombstone with me and a TV in one hand and a light bulb in the other. Wow, this hit me hard. Is this how I wanted to be remembered? Were these my values and my life’s work? After many days of feeling quite unsettled, I came to know I needed to extricate myself from this employment and career path. But how? All aspects of my life were embedded here. And where was I to go? I was adrift in a sea that I didn’t want to be in.

A few years later, the most heart wrenching and devastating blow came when my wife of fifteen years decided to move on. The announcement of her plans to separate and then divorce shattered my self-confidence and sense of self-worth. As I think back I can still remember the feeling of being in free-fall with nothing to hang onto. I could see no way forward. And how was I to comfort and protect my daughter who had to be just as devastated as me, when I felt so vulnerable, and adrift with no energy to give to others?

To compound my efforts to grieve, I did own a business and had responsibilities to attend to and employees to keep busy. So, I had to put one foot in front of the other, not with conviction or any idea where I was headed, but knowing I just had to. It was about a year later when I met Rita who had recently lost her husband. We were healing. We shared our stories. And together built our own internal energy that we would then be able to give to others. And our stories helped us understand the events and actions which had been instrumental in our healing and putting away that sense of being adrift.

As I developed my healing narrative, I thought back to my needing to change employment. I remember that I talked with friends and family and learned of the book *What Color is Your Parachute?* which described a process that helped me discover where I wanted to go with my life. I followed its every step because I was adrift and looking for direction. I will add that the book was very helpful. I ended up moving back to my childhood home, Ithaca, and building a life that many of you know snippets of where I could live out my values.

Shortly after my marriage shattered, I began regularly attending FUSIT. It was fortuitous that just three months after becoming a congregant, Dr. David Lehman offered a multi-session course titled "Building Your Own Theology." I enrolled. For those of you who haven't taken this course (I think Walt Peck teaches it these days), this is a wonderful exercise in climbing up the steeple to the highest point to work on your understanding of the meaning of life. I still remember that course as being a critical part of my gaining self-confidence and direction after the separation and before meeting Rita. I was able to establish my foundation which allowed me the strength to meet someone without being so obviously needy.

Neither of these action steps: finding and following “What Color Is Your Parachute” or taking “Building Your Own Theology” were premeditated. They were serendipitous opportunities that came forward which I grabbed as I floated adrift while looking for something to hold on to.

After the divorce, I became much more aware of that feeling of being adrift. One day the sea is smooth sailing and then out of nowhere a storm appears, you are caught unawares, and sent off adrift. I can now say that in time one gains skills and experiences in dealing with storms. What I learned when faced with these storms, and what brought me comfort and a sense of direction was to climb to the balcony, sometimes alone and sometimes with others, to look out over the turbulence and find a direction, then come down to where the action is and get to work.

A major chapter in my life was public service. It began in the 1980’s when I was appointed to the county’s EMC. A decade later, I stood for and was elected to public office and served on many inter-municipal boards. It was in those public service roles that I found many stormy seas. Some much rougher than others. The learning curve was steep. Many times, I would need to find solitude, collect my thoughts around my values and the essence of my role. Then come back together with associates and work collaboratively to find settled waters and move on. This would prepare me for the biggest challenge of my career for suddenly we were ground zero for the oil and gas industry to move into our neighborhoods and supposedly go about extraction of natural gas with impunity.

The fracking issue was sprung upon us with cash payments and slick language designed to hide the community impacts. Looking at an industry with mega amounts of money and attorneys,

the future looked grim. Many of us worked together to learn as much as we could. We met with those who had and were living with this horror to learn the broader story and bring it back to our community. We found legal scholars willing to challenge conventional wisdom that only state regulators could make the decision, that we were powerless – just pawns. Abandoned, Adrift. We dissected the issue from our balcony vantage point and search for a pathway to calmer seas. Collectively, we were successful at not being the sacrificed pawns. But corporate extraction of resources and wealth rages on, and many communities are now facing this struggle. Sadly, we, who encourage them by buying their products, are unwittingly complicit.

More recently at FUSIT, we found ourselves adrift when our beloved Reverend Margaret announced her resignation. Why? Who among us forced her hand? Or do we have a hidden culture that pushes ministers away? Will we ever have a minister partner again? What will become of us? We were physically separated by a pandemic. The sense of abandonment with no mooring was palpable.

I joined the FUSIT board soon after we lost those moorings since I felt I had experiences at finding direction after being tossed about. I will start by saying it has been my honor to serve with some extraordinary community members on last year's board to find something to lash onto and steady our drifting ship. The board climbed to the balcony. We spoke with several support personnel from the UUA, to learn that our loss may not be just about us. That nationwide, for all religious societies, ministers are leaving in large numbers with few entering as is the case in other human service professions like nursing and teaching. There was no lifeline in sight.

So, we started exploring pathways. A couple of us met with Dan Hotchkiss, the author of Ministry Governance which was the resource used to create our Partnership Governance style of operations. We also combed the internet and asked you via congregational conversations several questions that would help us focus on which pathways to pursue. It took us a year, but we do have a pathway with two governance partners that provide ministerial support for the times when we have a minister, but double as continuing bodies that fill the minister roles when we are in search. Are we tethered or still unmoored? Time will tell but the sea seems calmer now with opportunities again seen as possible, and we have had a several month period without major waves.

I have a couple more unsettling issues to dig into that are affecting all of us. And most of our summer presentations have spoken to them because they are ever present. There are forces in our nation that are deliberately misleading all that will listen. When as a nation we have no mooring of common facts, we have all succumb to tribalism. Close to half of our population is aligned with a fascist philosophy. According to *Henry A. Giroux* ***“The GOP’s attack on electoral integrity, judicial independence, critical education and voter rights, coupled with its unabashed defense of corruption, white nationalism and support for oligarchs” is causing the U.S. to become “more closely aligned with the nightmare of fascism”.*** ***“As language is stripped of any substantive meaning, and reason is undermined by conspiracy theories, falsehoods and misinformation produced by the right’s dis-
imagination machine, the ideological and institutional guardrails designed to protect democracy begin to collapse,”***

Where are we going? Our society has become unglued. What will become of us? At this time, we are certainly adrift.

If this weren't enough, overriding all societal unsettledness, is climate change. The magnitude of this tempest is so great it has already altered life as we know it. Environmental systems that our species has counted on since the beginning are changing very fast in unpredictable ways. We are unmoored and adrift. Discovering a way to become anchored to something is our challenge. Future generations need us to respond.

Adrift. We can find ourselves adrift on many levels as life takes sharp unexpected turns. Maybe there is just a fine line between feeling tethered to a predictable future and the feeling of being adrift. Maybe these opposing feelings are ever-present. Sometimes regaining the settled perception can happen relatively quickly and other times it can take months or years. And sometimes the causes for our being adrift are so large that we could be justified in feeling hopeless. For me these last two topics, a failing democracy and climate change are large enough and have been around long enough to generate the feeling of hopelessness.

We had several sermons this past year on Hope. I know I can't speak more eloquently. But in thinking of how to close this presentation, I recall Rev Schellenbeck's stories of her work in hospice and how hope is born in a place where there is no hope to be found. Looking back over my many adrift experiences, I see that most have been relatively temporary. Maybe that is why when a new feeling of being adrift confronts me, I have hope I can overcome it, hope that the lost feeling of being adrift is only temporary, hope we will build back and beyond.

Closing words

All right, every day ain't going to be the best day of your life, don't worry about that. If you stick to it, you hold the possibility open that you will have better days.

-Wendell Berry