UU ITHACA SERVICE JULY 13, 2025
Sermon by Howard Nelson

Intro to reading of poems

It's very nice to be with you again—thanks to Preston for inviting me.

The theme that has been chosen for the summer, "My Truths," is an interesting one, and I imagine it will elicit some interesting and varied messages. I hope I can add something worthwhile to the conversation.

If we're talking about religious truths, I would just say that I am an agnostic, who is a member of a Quaker meeting, who is interested in religion. One of my favorite books is William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Using the words "God" and "the Divine" usually doesn't seem helpful—just say "the Great Mystery" and leave it at that. I don't know if that makes me an outlier in a UU setting; my sense from what I know of Unitarianism is that it probably doesn't. It does somewhat at my Quaker meeting. Different strokes, different truths, for different folks. In any case….

I think I can say that My Truths are in my poems. I hope I can say that. They tend to be specific and physical, not metaphysical; reflective rather than invective; and they tend to be local, set in specific actual places. With that in mind, I'm going to read a group of poems that take place right here in Ithaca. The other common thread is that they are about my grandchildren. I know that "Let me tell you about my grandchildren" is not the most promising start for any conversation, but in spite of that, here we go.

Poems by Howard Nelson

DROPPING THE PICKLE

On our walk around the neighborhood,
we stop and have lunch at the Lincoln Diner.
It is not too early, at three years old,
for her to be introduced to the pleasures of this place—
small diner on Lincoln Street
with its clutch of tables and its counter lined with people
of all ages, and various vocations—college students,
guys in work clothes, a pair of cops, a couple of guys
in business suits, old guys with time on their hands
wearing baseball caps. A democratic crowd. Walt Whitman
would like it here, and not just because it's named Lincoln.
My grandaughter is so small, about three feet tall,
but she strides along, and when I lift her onto her stool,
without saying anything, she checks things out,
and she seems to think this is pretty cool.

Luckily we have found two stools open just opposite the grill.
I direct her attention there. I tell her to watch the man
who is cooking, flipping eggs and bacon, pancakes,
and a pile of home-fried potatoes.
He is obviously a master, a professional of long experience,
and he moves smoothly, in his casual clothes,
sweat pants and t-shirt, gliding through his orders,
flipping, tapping his spatula on the hot greasy grill.
She watches him, and I say, “Look, there’s your sandwich,
he’s making it,” as he puts it on to sizzle—grilled cheese
on whole wheat—while nearby my two eggs are deftly cracked.
Soon he turns around and puts our plates on the counter
in front of us and says, in a friendly way, “There you go.”
Wow. Profound. Somebody cooks food
right in front of you, and then gives it to you….
Her sandwich comes cut in two triangles,
with a little pile of potato chips, and a dill pickle.
She goes for the chips. After she eats several,
I suggest a bite of sandwich, and lift one triangle
to her lips. She takes a bite. But the chips
are the first order of business. OK.
When the chips are gone, she moves on to the pickle.
It is long and limber in her small fingers, and after
the first nibble of the tip, the slippery pickle slips
from her grip and falls to the floor. She looks down.
She looks at me, with an undecided, troubled look.
What’s the proper response to the loss of your pickle?
Is it an occasion for tears? She’s not sure.
I say to her, “Oh, you dropped your pickle.

That’s OK. Sometimes that happens.”
And she takes it to heart, the troubled look
goes away, and she says, “Sometimes that happens,”
with a philosophical tone. I say, “Here, eat your sandwich,”
and she starts in on it, she likes it, the good
grilled cheese sandwich of this world.

THOSE FACES ON THE PORCH

On the street I often walk with my granddaughter,
praising the flowers, stomping the puddles—
things are different day to day, month to month—
there’s a house we pass, a residence
for severely mentally disabled people.
When the weather’s nice,
three or four of those folks

are sitting on the porch.
They look blank. I say Hi,
they say nothing. They
just look at me—or not.
They will continue to be in the house,
and occasionally on the porch,
24/7, and this thought fills me with a flash
of sadness, terror, and amazement.
And then we are past the house,
and I forget them till the next time.
My granddaughter never sees them—
they are hovering above her
in their chairs, up there on the porch,
as she goes by on the sidewalk,
inspecting dandelions,
maple seeds, the ants
with all their joys and burdens.

SITTING ON THE PORCH STEPS ON AN OCTOBER DAY

We're sitting on the porch steps, my granddaughter and I.
She's one and a half years old. She can walk,
she's getting quite good at it, she toddles along.
But at the moment, we're sitting, on the front porch steps..
She sits up straight, interested, watching what goes by.
A car now and then. Especially interesting when it's a school bus.
"School bus!" I say, and she says "Bus," interested,
but without the exclamation point.
She has one-and-a-half-year-old aplomb.
When a walker goes by, I sometimes say hi.
If the walker is walking a dog, I say, "Look, there's a dog."
"Dog," she says. She's interested in dogs.
She's taking it all in, in her second year here on earth,
and I'm thinking, at seventy-five, it's good to be alive,
in such company, sitting on the porch steps
on a beautiful October day.
A man comes along, middle-aged, leaning forward,
with that frowning, self-absorbed look people often have.
He's not sauntering, not ambling or strolling,
Definitely not gamboling—he's walking seriously along,
head down, lost in his thoughts, which do not seem to be happy.
But apparently not totally lost. His peripheral vision
not turned off entirely. Because when he's passed by,
when he's in front of the next house, he stops. He comes back.
He says, "Would you like me to take your picture?
You look good, sitting there together."

"OK," I say, and I hand him my phone.
He takes a picture. He takes another, as we usually do.
Why take just one? He gives me back my phone.
We say a few words, the usual pleasantries.
My granddaughter doesn't say anything. She's observing.
She's considering. Probably not analyzing—
though she looks as if she might be.
I look at the photos. "Nice," I say. "Thanks."
"My pleasure," he says, and goes on his way.
If it had been just me, I doubt he would have stopped.
Quite unlikely he would have offered to take my picture.
But my little granddaughter, she has the presence.
She has the power. And somehow our duo,
just starting out, and somewhere near the end,
sitting here taking upon us the mystery of things.
I think we cheered him up.

WALKING TO THE ICE CREAM STORE

On a day in late May, we walk to the ice cream store.
She is four, or as she likes to say, four-and-a-half,
while I am seventy-four. We will always be

seventy years apart—as long as I last.
It's a mile walk, which is a pretty far,
when you're four. But she is up for it.

Nice day for a walk—warm, but not hot,
sunny, breezes blowing. So we go,
walking along the sidewalks, along

the streets lined with old, two-story houses.
She's a good walker, there's spring in her steps,
and four is a good age for being interested

in the things you see walking along—
more interested in flowers, for example,
than she may be when she's a teen-ager.

"Look, yellow tulips!" I say. She knows tulips.
"What are those purple ones on the bushes?" I ask.
Lilacs, she says. She knows lilacs. And I say,

"When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,"
not that she'll get the literary allusion, but
I enjoy saying it, whenever it seems appropriate.

Rhododendrons. What a word. She knows rhododendrons.
And poppies, bright orange, and on the next block, some pink ones.
This is quite a town for flower gardens in front yards.

Finally, we get to the ice cream store.
Purity Ice Cream. An institution around here.
“Ice cream of the Finger Lakes since 1936.”

We order our cones. We are prepared—
we discussed it on the way. She choses chocolate.
I’m having black cherry. When the teen-ager

behind the counter asks for our flavors,
I prompt her to tell her, and she is cool with it.
“Chocolate,” she says, loud and clear.

I grab napkins, and we carry our cones
outside to a picnic table. I give her some tips
for ice cream cone eating. Watch for drips.

And she does quite well at keeping up with them,
though her mouth is smeared with creamy brown.
We watch the people come out with their various

sizes and colors of cones and sundaes.
Interesting to see their choices.
I pop the pointed tip of my cone

with its last dab of ice cream into my mouth.
Pretty soon she does the same.
“OK, here we go,” I say, and she says,

“How are we getting home?” I say,
“Well, we’ve got to walk home. We can do it.”
“I’m not sure we can,” she says.

The mile seems longer now.
“Come on, let’s get started,” I say,
wondering how this is going to go,

and feeling a little guilty for making
this little kid walk so far. But, we go, slowly—
we dawdle a good deal, and she handles it,

doesn’t complain. I could pick her up

and carry her on my shoulders.
When we get to the bridge that crosses the creek,

we see ducks—a mother duck with six ducklings.
We stay and watch, ten minutes at least.
The ducklings pay no attention to us,

they are busy poking their bills
into the water among the weeds.
But mother mallard, she pays attention,

she looks up and doesn't take her eyes off us,
an intent and concerned duck gaze. We move on,
and in another twenty minutes, we're back home.

What are seventy years between us?
A May day, walking to the ice cream store.
When she's twenty, I'll be ninety.

When she's thirty, I'll be… not sure
what I'll be. Let be be finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream.

KINDERGARTEN PLAY

"The Three Billy Goats Gruff."

Great story. Wonderful plot.

Spun on three wheels of repetition, in the ancient fashion.

Limited number of characters,

but the teacher, in her resourcefulness—

do they teach that when you get a degree in education?—

has solved the problem, forming four small groups,

one for each goat, one for the troll,

plus one brave kid as narrator.

The troll a role I played,

in the second grade.
I played it alone.
Not sure what my teacher did with the extra kids,
of which there must have been at least twenty,
in those baby boom days of the 1950s.
Maybe she created a Greek chorus
that could accommodate them all.
I can't remember. But I know
there was only one troll, and that was me,
standing in the middle of the stage, with a paper bag
over my head, and another paper bag head on either side,
trolls being three-headed creatures.
And I sang a song
I have remembered ever since:
"I'm a troll, fal-de-roll,
I'm a troll, fal-de-roll,
I'm a troll, fal-de-roll,
and I will eat you for supper!"
I sang it to each of the goats,
until the third, the big one, came at me
and knocked me off the imaginary bridge.
I don't know why the teacher chose me.
Did she think I had talent?
Or just that I was a cooperative, not to say compliant,
little kid? Anyway, it was the most important role

I ever had in a play in my entire life.
But this is not about me.
Not about the play that took place in the All-Purpose Room
of Berkeley Avenue School in Westwood, New Jersey,
in 1955. This is about the production on the playground

of Fall Creek Elementary School, in Ithaca, New York,
in 2023. A cool and sunny May day.
The little kindergarten kids performing it so well.
Clearly they have practiced a lot.
They know their lines, though here and there
one looks at the next kid
to make sure that they are supposed
to be speaking or singing.
The goats, in their groups of three or four,
wear horns they made themselves
out of thick paper. They arrive in turn
and cross the bridge, and the troll,
who in this version is three kids
wearing orange wigs, accosts them,
until the big Billy Goat Gruff
knocks them all off the bridge,
the fall performed with various
acrobatic flourishes. This is theater,
and the kids are enjoying it,

playing their parts
with earnestness and gusto.
The parents and grandparents
are enjoying it too,
though “enjoying” doesn’t really describe
what one feels while watching children
who you think of as yours,
along with their peers, doing so well—
it can bring tears to your eyes.
But the play doesn’t end in the traditional way.
The teacher has written a new ending.
When the goats arrive safely in the meadow,
they feel a little guilty, and they start to feel
compassion for the troll. They go back,
and ask the troll, that is, the group of kids
playing the troll, how they’re doing,
and the troll kids say, more or less in unison,
“I feel terrible! That always happens to me.
Thanks for asking. This is the best day of my life!”
So the goats take the troll-kids with them
up into the meadows of the risers,
where the entire class lines up, and the music teacher
comes and stands beside them with his guitar,

and they sing “Bridge over Troubled Waters,”

in as moving a rendition as you are ever
likely to hear. They sing loud, they almost shout,
and when they finish, there is much applause.
They bow. Their teacher, who has been standing
in front of them silently directing, steps up
and turns to us, and sweeps her arm toward them.
They look out at us. They look pleased
with themselves. As they should be—
as cool sunny May morning slips spills sparkling
into kindergarten eternity.