

Our Journey Together

UUCGV Sermon by
Richard Hyland

March 3, 2019

I wish to dedicate this sermon to the memory of two very special people:

- *Dale Foreman, a former member of this church who made this place possible;*
- *Don Hyland, my Dad, on what would have been his 100th birthday today, who improved the world one Boy Scout at a time;*

Both were B17 bomber pilots in World War II, one over the Atlantic, one over the Pacific, risking their lives to keep us free.

We're all strangers at first. You and I. Travelers from somewhere else; immigrants perhaps, attracted by something bright and promising; or refugees, fleeing something dark and dangerous. All of us on journeys outward on different paths at different times, solitary; our baggage on our backs, until those paths converge...here, in this Valley on the Western slope of the Rockies ringed by rimrocks and the Grand river that cut through them.

And then begins another kind of journey, more challenging perhaps, that of fitting in, coming to terms with, settling into, a population of others in this Grand Valley whose outward journeys ended long ago and whose baggage of beliefs and practices over time have shaped the history and meaning of "community". A history of exclusion as well as inclusion, villains as well as heroes, isolation as well as independence. But a history that is evolving, and in that evolution – moving more rapidly now—lies opportunity for us strangers to become fellow citizens in this community, our histories enriching the others.

But it's hard to fit in alone. We seek others of like mind and attitude. Fellow travelers to inspire and accompany us on our inward journeys of soul and spirit. Compassionate friends to support and guide us through the multiple challenges of "fitting in, coming to terms with, settling into.." the larger community we are beginning to call home. Perhaps this has always been the role of religion and religious communities, including Unitarian Universalists, or maybe especially for Unitarian Universalists. Or so it seemed for immigrants to Western Colorado in the early 1880's. The following are a railway brakeman's views on the different religious denominations on their way to the Western Slope in 1882:

To me comes the brakeman, and seating himself on the arm of the seat, says:

"I went to church yesterday."

"Yes," I said, "And what church did you attend?"

"Which do you guess?"

***"Some union mission church?"** I hazarded.*

"Naw," he said "I don't like to run on these branch roads very much. I don't often go to church, but when I do, I want to run on the main line, where your run is regular and you go on schedule time and don't have to wait on connections. I don't like to run on a branch. Good enough, but I don't like it."

***"Episcopal?"** I guessed.*

"Limited express," he said, "all palace cars and two dollars extra for a seat, fast time and only stop at the big stations..All train men in uniform, conductor's punch and lantern silver-plated and no train boys allowed."

***"Methodist?"** I asked.*

"Nice road; fast time and plenty of passengers...Lively road; when the conductor shouts "All aboard," you can hear him to the next station. Every train lamp shines like a headlight. Stopover checks given on all through tickets: passenger can drop off the train as often as he likes, stay at the station two or three days and hop on the next revival train that comes thundering along.

***"Baptist?"** I asked.*

"River road; beautiful curves; sweep around anything to keep close to the river, but it's all steel rail and rock ballast, single track all the way and not a side track from round house to the terminus.

***"Presbyterian?"** I asked.*

"Narrow gauge," said the brakeman. "'Pretty track, straight as a rule; tunnel right through a mountain rather than go around it: spirit level grade, passengers have to show their tickets before they get on the train. Mighty strict road, but the cars are a little narrow: have to sit in one seat and no room in the aisle to dance.

***"Universalist?"** I asked.*

"Broad gauge," said the brakeman, "does too much complimentary business. Everybody travels on a pass. Conductor doesn't get a fare once in fifty miles. Stop at all flag stations, and won't run into anything but a union depot...Train orders are rather vague, and the train men don't get along well with the passengers.."

***"Free Thinkers?"** I said. [*read Unitarian*]*

"Scrub road," he said, "dirt road bed and no ballast: no time card and no train dispatcher. All trains run wild and every engineer makes his own time, just as he pleases...Kind of a go-as-you please road. Too many side tracks and every switch wide open all the time, with the switchman sound asleep and the target lamp dead out. Get on as you please and get off when you want to. Don't have to show your tickets and the conductor isn't expected to do anything but amuse the passengers... Do you know, sir, I asked a division superintendent where that road ran to, and he said he hoped to die if he knew. I asked him if the General Superintendent could tell me, and he said he didn't believe they had a general superintendent, and if they had, he didn't know any more about the road than the passengers. I asked him who he reported to, and he said

*'nobody'. I asked a conductor who he got his orders from, and he said he didn't take orders from any living man or dead ghost...Now you see, sir, I'm a railroad man, and I don't care to run on a road that makes no time, has no connections, runs nowhere and has no superintendent. It may be all right, but I've railroaded too long to understand it.*¹

Evidently, that road must still work. For 137 years later, another free-thinking couple found their way here. Jan and I arrived from Berkeley by way of Houston as strangers to the Grand Valley in August, 2013, having reversed the traditional family dynamic by leaving, rather than staying close to, our children and grandchildren in Texas, much to their dismay. We were both immigrants, seeking a return to Nature, and refugees, escaping defeats as well as the exciting, but soul-sapping embrace of big city life and its secular charms.

But we were not seeking a place to die; rather, we were seeking a place to live more deeply, or in Joseph Campbell's words "seeking not the meaning of life, but the experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane would have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually could feel the rapture of being alive."² And so, we arrived seeking a place where we could follow the twists and turns of our inward journeys while holding onto our shared passion for learning about others and the world in all its complexity.

But how to fit into this small, close-knit, conservative community? How to make it "home"? We needed others of like mind and attitude. We needed fellow travelers to inspire and accompany us on our inward journeys of soul and spirit. Compassionate friends to support and guide us through the multiple challenges of "fitting in, coming to terms with, settling into.." the larger community we are beginning to call home. And we found them in a small tribe of seekers who had been wandering from place to place in the Grand Valley for more than half a century and had finally found a home in an old bank building across the street from the Main Library. "How fitting," we thought, a free thinking UU congregation growing out of a capitalist citadel, across from a public repository of knowledge." By June, 2014, sharing and inspired by the exuberance of the Congregation upon the opening of their new home, we joined and in doing so, found our own home at last.

Now, five years later, remembering our journey together, you and us, I find it hard to describe what being part of UUCGV has meant to us, whether it be the **spiritual leadership** of Wendy, the sermons by her and many of you as recently as last week with Monte; the **congregational leadership** of Gary, Janet, Elizabeth, Andrea, Bill, Duane, Robin and many others through the Board, LDT and TLC; or the **compassion for each other**, as recently as now in the ongoing effort of Laurel and Jake to forge a family out of the children and love of Connie Murillo; or the

¹ Unknown author. Crested Butte Republican, Wednesday, January 25, 1882, Vol.1, No.18, p.3

² Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth, (New York, Doubleday, 1988), p.3.

compassion for others by Laura, Chris, Barbara and many of you through the Caring team, Soup kitchen and homeless overflow shelter; or the **passion for social justice and an end to war and domestic violence** by Robert, Jana and many of you, carried out through Black Lives Matter, the Hispanic Affairs Project, the Domestic Violence Action Team, the Interfaith Coalition and in many other ways.

Or the **courage** of Billie Sage and her trans voice, the **hugs** and wisdom of Duane, the **laughter and cuisines** of the Men's Cooking Group, the **mystical insights** of the Goddess group, the **music** and harmonies of the Choir and many of you as accomplished musicians, the **love of Nature**, be it mountain trails with Walter and Janet, alpine skiing with Peg and Lance, river rafting with Dennis and Andrea, or a **new theology of the planet** through the effort to curb and perhaps reverse the ecological and climatological ravages of runaway capitalism, thereby re-balancing human and other life on the planet, through the Green Sanctuary program. And ultimately being part of UUCGV is being in **a place, a physical facility** that centers us and helps us to do all these things and, in the process, has become a vibrant centering place for a host of other groups from the larger community as well. And so much more that tantalizes and transforms.

It has been quite a journey. "Too many side tracks" the brakeman would say. Perhaps. "Scrub road; dirt road bed and no ballast. Everybody travels on a pass. Conductor doesn't get a fare once in fifty miles" he might also say looking at us. Would he be right? Or do we even know at this point in our journey together? Perhaps most of us would agree with the brakeman that, "It may be all right, but I've railroaded too long to understand it."

Either way, journeying with you on this great adventure, I cherish the ministry you have shared with Jan and me. It has taught us much about compassion and given us courage to face our failings and find joy, not fear, in our inward journey in the late Autumn of our years together. This tribe of souls, you fellow travelers, wandering no longer, have become precious to us as we look forward. As the brakeman said, we have no idea where the trail leads or what the terminus looks like. All we know at this point is that you are traveling with us and that makes all the difference.

But the journey is more than a spiritual quest. It is more than ministry. We need governance to survive. Which means learning how to build and maintain the structure, organization and process that goes with it. The "roadbed and ballast, connections and timetable, dispatchers, engineers and conductors" that make it work, the brakeman might say. And our own Long-Term Planning (LTP) team would agree and did so last year. For we are no longer a wandering tribe, a family church with few staff, but a settled congregation in a new home; a pastoral church with multiple staff --all paid professionals, most working on a part-time basis-- each needed for the journey ahead.

Most notable here is the newly initiated search for a new Director of Religious Education (DRE) to succeed and build on the work of Shari Daly-Miller who will be moving on this Summer. This is a critical position in terms of who we are trying to become, whom we want to attract, and where we want to go. Those of you who attended the recent Town Hall Meeting had a chance to learn and comment on this. Finding and attracting the right person will require investment.

Our staff is essential to the operation of UUCGV and everything it has become. It is essential to both ministry and governance. It also represents 60 percent of our budget (\$119,000 out of \$198,000). It includes:

- Reverend Wendy, our Minister
- Miranda, our Administrator and her staff
- Amanda Lynn, our Music/choir director and her staff
- Shari, our Religious education coordinator and her staff
- Sterling, our Facilities manager and his staff

Let's take a moment to think of them, picture them if you can, and ask ourselves two questions:

- How important were they to your decision to come, come again, and stay with this church as a member or visitor?
- What kind of church would this be without them?

Last year, I and 3 other members (Joanie Leinbach, Monte High, Carmine Nugent) of a newly-formed UUCGV entity, the Staff-Congregation Relations Committee (SCR) dug deeply into staff structure, organization, supervisory relationships, job descriptions, work responsibilities and work tasks in order to learn the staff role in how we as a church operate. We were blown away by how much they do and how well they do it—often beyond their formal responsibilities—for the comparatively modest pay we give them. We were also blown away by how little the Congregational membership –you out there—knows about what they do, who they are, and the value they bring to our collective journey as a religious community.

We intend to change this. Our SCR mission is to do two things: 1/ oversee staff, in partnership with our Minister, Wendy, who is their supervisor, and 2/ facilitate, or mediate as necessary, the Congregation's interactions with staff –educating the Congregation as appropriate—so that we all stay on track and move forward together. In coming weeks, as opportunities present themselves, we will introduce you to the staff, one by one, telling you who they are, what they do, and how it fits into how we operate as a religious community. As a first step toward that goal, we have prepared a relatively simple organization chart of UUCGV teams and staff that I think you may find useful. It is even color-coded, highlighting the overall staff role in UUCGV operations.

But our staff, important as they are to us, is only part of the structure of governance we need on our journey. Our physical journey has ended. Our spiritual journeys continue. We have found a home, worked hard to convert it from a financial place to a spiritual place. Ask around. Ask Gary, John, Bill, Cheryl, Joel, Dennis, Floyd and many others. The stories of this construction work of love abound and inspire. Buying and maintaining this place –through the generosity of a loan by a member--accounts for nearly another 20 percent of our budget (\$39,000) with more needed for continuing to improve it.

And now, let's take another moment to look around this beautiful sanctuary, this sacred place, and ask ourselves another two questions:

- How important was this place to your decision to come, come again, and stay with this church as a member or visitor?
- What kind of church would this be without it?

If he could hear your thoughts and see this place right now, I think the brakeman might begin to understand what the "Free thinker" road is all about. But he would still be hard-headed, looking at us over the years from his perch on the arm of the seat. He would say, what you have and where you're trying to go is a journey too precious to lose. He would warn us against "doing too much complimentary business. Everybody traveling on a pass. Conductor doesn't get a fare once in fifty miles". And we would listen. And we would, I think, looking around, agree.

A closing note. Next Saturday evening, March 9th, the Stewardship team is putting on an elaborate gig right here in the church from 7-9PM. Childcare provided. The theme is "**Roots Hold Me Close & Wings Set Me Free**". Appropriate, I think. It kind of captures what I feel and tried to say this morning. Andrea, Cheryl and a lot of others have worked hard to put this together. It's an opportunity to express how much this church means to you. I'll be there, and I hope you will be too.