

THE JOY (AND THE PAIN) OF RE-ENTRY
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
September 4, 2016

OPENING WORDS *Beginning To Begin* ~ Gunilla Norris

Can we recognize that now and then there comes an inner sense,
A fleeting thought, a little yearning to live our lives differently?
We don't know what this means or what it requires.
We shake these notions off like a dog shakes off water
And go about our business.
But the longing continues.
Our practical selves only know how to perfect, produce and perform.
This, at least, we can see as useful.
This has results.
We want to believe in this way of perceiving.
For a little while it seems to give us some sort of self-image.
But the longing doesn't let us alone.
It won't go away.
We become even busier perhaps to "take care of it."
We numb ourselves with distractions – things to do, consume, and maintain –
Things to collect, experience, and entertain.
We can always think of more miles to run.
Still the little yearning continues. . . .
Could we sense that this longing is not lack
Or something worse – some kind of fundamental fault in us?
Could we receive it as an invitation instead,
A calling, a small voice inviting us home, back to our truer self?
This shift in thought can move mountains.
It can let us begin to begin.

And so, let us begin.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Where the Wild Things Are* ~ Maurice Sendak

(A young boy is sent to his room without supper, and he sets off on a great adventure to where the wild things are. Eventually, he returns to his room and finds a warm supper waiting.)

READING *Slipped the Bonds* ~ Vanessa Rush Southern

This reading comes from Rev. Vanessa Rush Southern's meditation manual *Miles of Dream*, published by Skinner House Books.

There are no summer camps open during the last week of August, so my family has taken to spending that week at the beach. The same beach. The same house. My parents

come. My cousin, with her two kids. Each year some additional family members join us, too.

The house we rent is three houses away from the sand dunes. It is close enough that when we forget something or one of the babies needs to use the bathroom, we can run back and make it in time. And it is perfectly situated to watch the comings and goings of beach life from the front porch.

On the beach, dogs are only allowed before eight in the morning and after five at night. So it was that one morning I spotted the woman and her Irish setter who had gotten up early to take advantage of this window of time. I saw them at the end of their outing. Actually, I spotted her dog long before the woman came into view. He was wet, with his long fringe covered in sand, and he streaked down the path, stretching out like a race horse hungry for the track. As soon as he came off the path, he set a course through nearby back yards, then weaved through the adjacent condominium parking lot, down driveways, and round and round again.

The dog's owner, meanwhile, took her time coming down the path. She occasionally yelled his name, but almost absentmindedly so, as she walked the last stretch toward the road. When she reached the end she dusted the sand off her calves and feet, then stood there, checking her nails. She adjusted her bra strap. Meanwhile, her dog continued streaking back and forth, the feathers of his hindquarters flapping like a strange set of wings, tongue lolling, utterly alive and loving this part of his day. This ritual went on for three or four minutes, as I imagine it did a few times a week, maybe even every day. Eventually, the dog strolled up to the woman, and she reached down to pat his head. Not once did she chastise him or show any frustration. Instead, there seemed to be a kind of resigned acceptance in both of them as she snapped his leash back into place, as if she knew and shared her dog's need for joy and pleasure, for freedom.

A few days later we packed up the house to head home. Days of sand and fun would be giving way, as they do, to fall, with its schedules and obligations. I thought of the woman and her dog. Like him, I tried to squeeze out every moment of fun and abandon from our window of time there. Like her, I had responsibilities to return to. But as we put the suitcases in the trunk I felt kin to them both in their early morning ritual: We all resist a little the moment the leash snaps back into place.

MESSAGE

Part 1 – Rev. Julie Stoneberg

Do you feel this morning as if the leash has been snapped back into place? Perhaps as though the time of freedom and lack of constraint has ended, and now we must once again be 'grownups?' I know I feel a bit like that.

This particular community has a long history of slowing down during the summer months, of going on hiatus, giving those who serve so diligently on our committees and teams a much-

deserved break. And purportedly, this downtime allows all of us to more fully embrace the summer months...to take holidays and trips and go to summer camp and to just relax. While there are arguments to be made on both sides of this practice, it is our current reality, and this reality means that we have a time to depart built into our schedule, and another time... today... when we return to 'normalcy.'

When we enter May and the time of leaving comes close, we experience the pressure to wind things up and the pleasure of letting go of responsibilities; the joy of anticipating our summer adventures, along with sadness about being away from one another and this community of love and support.

And then, when September nears, we experience the regret of summer's passing, the dread of needing to once again pick up our regular tasks...and all this alongside the very real joy of coming home...of seeing one another again.

Setting out and returning home are built into the regular schedule of this community.

Part 2 - Jovanna Soligo

At the end of our church year, my responsibilities seem to dramatically ramp up. As chair of the Creative Worship Team there is an outdoor service and potluck picnic to plan and summer services to prepare for. Each June, after those tasks are accomplished I utter an audible, Whew!

As a member of our community, in June there are also a series of lasts I enjoy.

At the last Service Leader Community of Practice gathering we review our year by sharing poignant moments and we express our hopes for expanding our experience in the coming year.

As a member of our choir, Resonance, I feel a little sad after our last Sunday sing and I wonder how we are going to manage to be without the pleasure of one another's company practicing every Sunday evening.

The sweetness of our community is amplified at our last Sunday Service when Rev Julie leads us through our spiral dance. As we pass by one another gazing into each other's eyes, I am always deeply moved.

And then comes summer!

I love summer more than any other season. I love the flowers, the aroma, the moisture in the air, the freedom of movement, the stars, swimming, fireflies, fresh fruit, bare feet, bare shoulders, swimming, canoeing, camping, morning walks, did I mention swimming, lemonade, eating every meal outside, wading in the creek, and on and on.

Of all the places I've ever lived, Southern Ontario has the best summers, hands down.

Because I know that it doesn't last long here, my arms are wide open to summer. Stretched out wide as possible, I'm poised to take it all in.

I call Ontario summers "High Summer". Here, the humidity is off the charts, the lakes are warm and the cicadas sing out boldly.

I am in heaven during these few months of the year. Summer nourishes me through and through.

There's always a time in late August when the season begins tipping towards autumn. The night temperature drops, the lake water begins to cool and I put a sweater on when I go out for my morning walk.

For me, this time of year is always bittersweet because I know that something I love is coming to an end. It's beautiful in a way, knowing that, because I'm able to savour the moments left of summer all the more.

And so, in this way, I gently let go of summer by appreciating whatever moments are left. And in doing so, I start to open to the beauty of fall; the crisp air, the cool nights for sleeping, the colours of yellow, orange, gold and crimson.

I start thinking about returning to the Unitarian Fellowship and I begin the work of our community usually at first via brief emails reluctantly sent. I usually preface whatever I have to talk about with the words "I know it's still summer but there are a few things that we have to attend to in preparation for our church year". And I end my email with "Now, go back to summer! Enjoy your last swim or camping trip or ..."

It doesn't take too long before what feels like the responsibilities of community shift into pleasure of the connection of community.

We meet for our first Sunday morning service. We sing together and perhaps we become one voice in a responsive reading. We begin our year of shared experiences with the excitement of renewed friendships and the anticipation of making new friends.

Summer is almost over but it remains alive in my memories and I intend to bring the nourishment I received from the weeks of warmth into the work and play of our community.

Part 3 - Rev. Julie Stoneberg

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Jovanna

Jovanna has just shared her personal experience of setting out and returning. With which parts of her story did you most resonate?

I sometimes wonder if our culture has placed too great an emphasis on the 'setting out,' giving the journey...or at least travel and adventures...too important a place in the crafting of a life of meaning. It's sort of like that numbing drive to shop...a conditioned or induced kind of addiction to leave home, to travel, to find adventure. Perhaps this emphasis has made it difficult to value the return. Maybe it's my time of life, but I find myself increasingly drawn to the act of returning... to that place where I exist within a solid community of connection... where I know and am known.

And yet...and yet...a person can never really stay completely at rest. Even the homebound set out on spiritual adventures. Even those who cannot travel physically take journeys of the mind into their past and their future. And Unitarians are especially inclined to speak of life AS a journey. Next week we're going to look at the part of that journey that involves returning to the source. I believe that we need the returning as much, maybe more, than we need the leaving.

This week's "The Flame," our e-news bulletin, contained a link to September's theme packet on 'return:' may you find some time to review it. In that packet, I told of my recent day-trip to Gananoque to the Thousand Islands Playhouse to see their production of "Into the Woods." Sondheim's musical interweaves several fairy tales with complexity and layered meaning. If you've never seen it, I sure recommend searching out the recent movie version starring Meryl Streep.

For me, its most compelling motif is that of heading into the woods...to begin a journey, to have an adventure, to do what is needed. The implication is that at some point everyone goes into the woods. We have to face real life challenges. We need to answer the call to adventure. We are compelled to play with the wild things. We have to confront our giants.

And in the woods...on those travels...friends are made, truths are realized, innocence is lost, mistakes are made, strength is found. When the story ends, everyone heads home...back to what was but what is no longer the same...no longer the same because we ourselves have changed. In the words of Nelson Mandela, "There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered."

Joseph Campbell identified a pattern in narrative and myth (and fairy tale) that he named 'the hero's journey.' It is that of leaving ordinary time and space to set out in search of some treasure, to confront some fear, or to catalyze some needed change. After an arduous journey, many wrong turns, and a nearly deadly battle, the hero returns home bearing treasure, or

having been changed in a way, that has the power to transform the world just as the hero has been transformed.

Now, I don't expect that many of us went into summer wearing red capes and thinking we were off to slay dragons or fell giants. But all the same, we did, I know, confront obstacles, face issues of personal discernment, meet with family intractabilities, and discover unexpected treasures and gifts. We are not who we were two months ago.

So, we return, changed. We return feeling refreshed, or reticent, or with longing in our hearts. We return looking for something we left behind. We return carrying the pain of some unwanted experience. We return with some sense of regret for what we did or didn't do. We return anticipating the year ahead.

But before we leap into our known routine, back into ordinary time, let's pause to consider how we have been changed by our journeys...taking the time to name and acknowledge the new awareness-es we are now carrying. I'm going to give you a minute or two to consider this in silence. In what ways have you been changed during the summer months? (1 minute) Jovanna spoke of the nourishment she received over the summer...and of bringing back its warmth into her work and play. For myself, now entering my tenth year with you, I bring back a renewed commitment to my ministry here. What new wisdom...or strength...or wound...do you bring back into our community as you return? Would anyone like to call it out?

So here's my challenge to all of us: How might we put to use all of these riches...all that we have learned and gained to make our 'home'...to which we return...a more beautiful, loving, and generative place? Let us not allow the power that our gifts have to make a difference be diminished by not acknowledging and using them, but rather, let's allow those gifts and learnings to shine.

Indeed you have been changed, however imperceptibly, by your experiences of the past months. The task before us...the journey we undertake here...is to take and use all of who we are, and all of what we carry, to transform, and to bless, our home, our community, our world. In Sondheim's words, we go "into the woods to get the thing that makes it worth the journeying into the woods." May you have found just the thing that made your summer journey worthwhile, and may the ways in which you have been changed ripple into all of life around you. You are home, here.

So be it.

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So be it.

READING

~ Nancy Shaffer

Because we spill not only milk
knocking it over with an elbow
when we reach to wipe a small face...
But also spill seed on soil we thought was fertile but isn't,
and also spill whole lives, and only later see in fading light
how much is gone and we hadn't intended it...
Because we tear not only cloth
thinking to find a true edge and instead making only a hole
but also tear friendships when we grow
and whole mountainsides because we are so many
and we want to live right where black oaks lived,
once very quietly and still...
Because we forget not only what we are doing in the kitchen
and have to go back to the room we were in before,
remember why it was we left
but also forget entire lexicons of joy

and how we lost ourselves for hours
yet all that time were clearly found and held
and also forget the hungry not at our table...
Because we weep not only at jade plants caught in freeze
and precious papers left in rain
but also at legs that no longer walk
or never did, although from the outside they look like most others
and also weep at words said once as though
they might be rearranged but which
once loose, refuse to return and we are helpless...
Because we are imperfect and love so
deeply we will never have enough days,
we need the gift of starting over, beginning
again: just this constant good, this
saving hope.

CLOSING WORDS

#685 (T.S.Elliot)

I. What we call a beginning is often the end
and to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.

II. 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.

Go out...to begin, to explore, to bless the world...and come back soon!

Amen.