

A DIFFERENT DRUMMER
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OPENING WORDS *In The Beginning Was the Noise* ~ Marcia Mcfee

In the beginning was the noise...and the noise begat the rhythm... and the rhythm begat everything else, and the dance began.

All: as rhythm sounds, creation happens.

We are a people bound together through sacred sound.

All: as rhythm sounds, our hearts become one.

Our faith leads us to a world reverberating like a thousand different thunders.

All: as rhythm sounds, community happens.

We are part of a rhythmic universe as we pulse together.

All: as rhythm sounds, opposition ceases.

We are all companions of life's rhythms in our stillness...and motion, in sound and silence, in darkness and light, our souls are uplifted.

All: as rhythm sounds, we are standing on sacred ground.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *The Loudest, Fastest, Best Drummer* ~ Marguerite W Davol

(The story of a little girl who is born a drummer and has to drum no matter what. We set this exciting tale right here in Peterborough.)

READING *The End of iChurch (excerpt)*¹ ~ Fredric Muir

Near the end of my junior year in college, on the afternoon of the first Earth Day, I was in a class on American Transcendentalism. We convinced Dr. Cauger to hold class outside, and we sat in the grass and listened as he read aloud Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Divinity School Address." It was as though he was channeling the Sage of Concord, who was speaking to me.

After class, I asked what religion Emerson was. "Unitarian," he said. I asked if it still existed. "Exist?" he replied. "Yes it exists! There's a congregation on the west side. Do you want to go Sunday?" And that was that! I cannot emphasize enough just how life-changing "The Address" and other works of "Saint" Emerson were for me; they moved me and set me in a new direction.

Prior to my Earth Day epiphany, I was religious – I had felt the pull toward ministry as a boy in my liberal Protestant church – but did not think of myself as "spiritual" because I never had the words to put to the spirituality I had known since childhood. Emerson provided what I needed to be both religious and spiritual. My story, I know from decades of conversation with UUs lay and ordained, is hardly unique.

"No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature," Emerson proclaimed. "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." Emersonian individualism. [] Think of the "i" that's placed in front of the names of Apple products. Some say the "i" means

¹ <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/end-ichurch>

“Internet.” Others explain that the “i” stands for “individual”: This is your personal piece of technology, to be used for whatever purpose you want. Fifteen years ago, Apple appealingly exploited the theme of individualism in a commercial that sounds like Emerson channeled through Jack Kerouac: “Here’s to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They’re not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. They push the human race forward.”

Many of us were drawn to Unitarian Universalism because it seemed to be the church of Emersonian individualism. We are the iChurch. I’m not sure Emerson’s goal was for us to be “the crazy ones,” but my thirty-seven years in the UU ministry have convinced me that historian Conrad Wright is correct: “[O]ne cannot build a church on Emerson’s dicta: ‘men are less together than alone,’ []”

For all its appeal and its influence in [] culture, individualism is not sustaining: Individual-ism will not serve the greater good, a principle to which we Unitarian Universalists have also committed ourselves. There is little-to-nothing about the ideology and theology of individualism that encourages people to work and live together, to create and support institutions that serve common aspirations and beloved principles.

The inherent worth and dignity of the individual is not just our First Principle as UUs: often it is our defining principle. But we frequently overlook another strand of our tradition [], another story about ourselves that can deepen and grow our future. It is not the language of individualism, not of the iChurch, but of covenant: “As free congregations we prom-is[e] to one another our mutual trust and support.”

We cannot do both covenant and individualism; individuality, yes, but not individualism. Articulating and living our Principles as a commitment to covenant – creating and sustaining a community by “promising to one another our mutual trust and support” – this takes extra effort.

MESSAGE

(sung) And now, the end is near
And so I face, the final curtain
My friend, I’ll say it clear
I’ll state my case, of which I’m certain
I’ve lived a life that’s full
I’ve traveled each and every highway
And more, much more than this, I did it my way...

Such a clear expression of individualism and personal empowerment. Oh, and then there’s this one...

Whether I'm right or whether I'm wrong.
Whether I find a place in this world or never belong,
I gotta be me, I've gotta be me...

Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr...both singing paraphrases of these famous sentiments of Henry David Thoreau: "Let every one mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he was made. Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed...? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."

But is listening to the beat of a different drummer just about expressing our individuality? I wonder. And I invite you to come wonder about this with me.

Let's start on a personal level. I expect we all have stories about when we have been in a situation where our heart's desire was to fit in, and other stories about times when we have had no choice but to follow a different path. I hope this morning that some of those life stories will float up to the surface of your memory, so that you can examine them more closely.

For myself, I see my childhood and youth as a constant struggle between the forces of conformity and individuality. Whenever I felt like a misfit, which happened regularly, conformity looked like the answer to my angst. But, I fought the battle for the right to be me when 'fitting in' felt like I would be sacrificing something of myself.

I was born into a fundamentalist Christian family. There were times that I felt so out of step with them, so excluded from the 'born again club', that I stuffed down my objections for the sake of feeling part of the family. Understandably, I wanted their love and acceptance; indeed, I longed for it.

But there were other times when that particular square hole was beyond what my round peg soul was willing to suffer, times when I chose to rebel and be defiant. Surely, some of that was natural developmental teenager-stuff, but not all of it. I simply knew when I couldn't go along with the status quo without feeling that I was betraying my true self.

In my public school years, we were newcomers in a large farming community where everyone was related and had lived on that land for generations. Naturally, I didn't fit in. And sometimes kids were mean about that, and bullied me. By junior high, I had developed a devil-may-care persona, in which I set about to be intentionally different in order to APPEAR that I was marching to the beat of my own very interesting drummer. I wore my difference as a badge of honour. But honestly, it was more of a shield for my heart.

I tell you all this, not to make it all about me...I don't think my experience was much different than that of other youth. I tell you this because I think it illustrates how confusing it can be to sort out our intentions in, and our reasons for, the decisions we make about when to conform and when to follow a different path.

You see, sometimes we are truly hearing the beat of a distant drummer and are being called to be or do something authentically 'me', even if it's counter-cultural. And sometimes, our radicalism is, in truth, a response to other cues or pressures, and not really a call from our deepest selves. (As an aside, I don't believe that the distant drummer is ever calling us to be narcissistic.)

Let's set this personal wondering aside for a bit, and take a look at the some of the history of non-conformity in this faith. There are aspects of our theology that demand that the distant drummer be heard. There are things about our religious context that create a culture of

individualism in our congregations. And there are many things about who we are, and who we say we are, that attract non-conformist, maverick spirits into our midst.

For example, Unitarianism was part of the 16th century Radical Reformation. Along with groups like the Hutterites and the Mennonites, Unitarians rejected the authority of the institutional church as being unbiblical, questioned child baptism, and believed that plain folk should be able to read the Bible themselves and be able to participate in communion. Unitarians were called heretics, and were persecuted, and killed.

Then, in the early 19th century, churches across New England were split by the 'Unitarian Controversy.' Over time, some congregations and their ministers had become quite liberal...emphasizing the freedom of the human will, the possibility of continuing spiritual growth, and the goodness of God, while rejecting the more mainstream doctrines of original sin, predestination, and the trinity. When an article published in 1815 called upon the more orthodox to separate themselves from the liberals, a huge rift developed; from then on, the adjective Unitarian would describe certain churches and not others.

So, rooted in Christianity, coming into being during the Reformation, growing up surrounded by traditional beliefs, Unitarian Universalism eventually heard the beat of a different drummer, moving beyond the boundaries of Christianity to claim its own unique identity in the religious landscape.

There's also the reality that UUs choose to be governed by congregational polity, which is to say, we have no hierarchical organizational structure. The Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough is self-governed and self-sustaining. As is evident in all political systems, the mode of governance we use is indicative of, and supportive of, the values and beliefs we hold. We are suspect of authority, and value self-reliance.

And, our foundational principles and sources contain references to individuality and freedom in multiple places. The inherent worth and dignity of each person. A free search for truth and meaning. The right of conscience. The wisdom and reliability of personal experience.

Heretics. Free thinkers. Self-reliant persons. This is just in our DNA as Unitarian Universalists. So, if you are someone who does things just a little differently, doesn't easily flow with the mainstream, who likes to colour outside the box, who often is not sure where they fit in... perhaps this is just the right place for you.

We believe that who you are is gift to the world, and that no one else can be you, except you. We want you to be who you were born to be, and to be the very best you possible. We want to create an atmosphere in which that still, small voice inside each of us can be heard and honoured.

Our tendency as UUs is to be non-conformist and to like the idea of marching to a different beat. We are a gathering of individuals, each of whom has the right and the responsibility to pursue their own path. And that's where the distant drummer comes in...that music, that call, is about hearing the deep messages that call us to authenticity, to be, and believe, and act in alignment with who we truly are...regardless of the consequences.

So, that distant drummer may even be heralded as a Unitarian prophet.

But...but...there is always another side, right? Psychiatrist M. Scott Peck put it this way:

"The problem – indeed the total failure – of the "ethic" of rugged individualism is that it . . . incorporates only one half of our humanity. It recognizes that we are called to individuation, power, and wholeness. But it denies entirely the other part of the human story; that we can never fully get there and that we are, of necessity, in our uniqueness, weak and imperfect creatures who need each other. . . [The ethic of rugged individualism] also relentlessly isolates us from each other. And it makes genuine community impossible."²

I'd like to think that even Thoreau knew this. We often remember him as a lone ranger, out in the woods. It is true that he was unconventional, to say the least, but he spent just two years at his little cabin, and in reality had regular guests there. In fact, he was only able to build that cabin because of his friends...one of them let him build it on his land. So, he had a strong community of friends and family that were part of his life from birth to death.

(Incidentally, Thoreau as raised in the Unitarian church and his family was right in the middle of the Unitarian controversy I mentioned earlier. When their church split, his mother and her sisters went over to the rival congregation, but his mother soon found that her free-thinking views were not welcome there and returned to the family pew at the Unitarian church.)³

Anyway, Thoreau's community of faith was the New England transcendentalists. Transcendentalism evolved out of the Unitarian emphasis on free conscience, but they wanted a religious experience more intuitive than rational; they believed in the goodness of both people and nature, and had faith that we are at our best when truly self-reliant.⁴ (Ralph Waldo Emerson, the author of "Self-Reliance" was a transcendentalist and the land-owning friend of Thoreau.) Self-reliant, and still...the Transcendentalists were a tight group of friends who formed a club, met regularly and clearly relied on one another for support and intellectual stimulation.

There is another side to our humanity that we must not ignore. In a 1993 sermon, Rev. John Papandrew suggested that as an ethic, individualism ultimately fails us, with worrisome theological implications: [Quote] There is a vast underworld of people who have lived with the fantasy of the Lone Ranger and found it to be Hell. For Hell is the absence of relationship – the ultimate disconnection."⁵ [unquote]

We need relationship. We need one another. We are called to make commitments to one another. And maybe this is the message that is beating for us now...a drum that calls us, as a faith, to recognize the whole of who we are as beings....a whole which includes both the need to express our individuality and the need to be held in loving, affirming relationships. We need the right to be who we are, as well as the chance to exist in community where we can offer our true selves and in return receive unforeseen connection and loving affirmation.

Perhaps this new drumbeat is calling us to hold both of these things...not in tension or opposition, but in balance...healthy balance. We can be strong individuals who respond to their own drummer and also enter into deep and meaningful covenant in community. We can

² Quoted in: <http://www.uua.org/governance/polity/47007.shtml>

³ <http://uudb.org/articles/henrydavidthoreau.html>

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transcendentalism>

⁵ Quoted in: <http://www.uua.org/governance/polity/47007.shtml>

demonstrate to the world that this is not an either/or proposition. We can be self-reliant people who need one another. We can be the both/and people.

We need one another. You see, I believe that whatever our age, we are confronted with the same kind of choices that I was met with as a kid. It can be hard to know when to be a heretic and when to be a joiner. It's difficult to disregard overpowering cultural messages in favour of what we know in our hearts to be true. And it is very painful when we are rejected by those who do not accept who we are or the path we must follow, especially when they are members of our families.

We come together so that we can process our experiences of both rejection and belonging...to heal the injuries that happen along the way...to celebrate true paths followed...and to sort through the myriad of cultural and emotional messages that bombard us daily. We come together to help one another discard those messages which are affronts to our very selfhood and to embrace those which come from our deepest souls. And to learn to discern the difference.

Rabbi Kushner once said, "Sometimes you are just going about your life, and you stumble on something that has your name on it." You see, you do know when something has your name on it. You know when a particular drumbeat is something which only you can hear. And this community can be the place that helps you pick up that bright shiny possibility or tune into that far off longing, and open your heart to life...your life.

That's what we're all about. Being a beloved community has our name on it. Do you hear its call?

I am so grateful for who we are, and can be, together.

Blessed be.

READING *The Road Not Taken* ~ Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

CLOSING WORDS

Breaking Surfaces

~ Mark Nepo

Let no one keep you from your journey,
no rabbi or priest, no mother
who wants you to dig for treasures
she misplaced, no father
who won't let one life be enough,
no lover who measures their worth
by what you might give up,
no voice that tells you in the night
it can't be done.

Let nothing dissuade you
from seeing what you see
or feeling the winds that make you
want to dance alone
or go where no one
has yet to go.

You are the only explorer.
Your heart, the unreadable compass.
Your soul, the shore of a promise
too great to be ignored.

Grateful for both kinds of paths...the ones lain out smooth before us, and ones less traveled
by...and with gratitude for all the travelers we meet and who join us along the way...go forth
in these days of Thanksgiving.
Amen.