

The Wind at Our Backs
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
Rev. Julie Stoneberg
April 29, 2007

So, I guess we're starting something here. Whew. This takes a LOT of deep breathing! Does it feel ominous to you? You may have heard that I sort of freaked out the search committee by taking several days to respond to their offer to be your ministerial candidate. I've tried to reassure them, repeatedly, that the time I took had nothing to do with you...and everything to do with the sheer weight of the decision. Now, I've never been sky-diving, but to explain my slow response, I told them that I had felt like I was standing at the open door of a plane...wanting to take the leap, knowing that an incredible adventure lay ahead, cognizant of all of the planning and training it had taken to get to that point, and yet when the moment came, the moment I'd been looking forward to... I couldn't quite pry my fingers off the doorframe. You may be feeling the same way now, standing here on the verge of your first-ever candidating week. Just what have we gotten ourselves into?

I hope that this is a rhetorical question...that we haven't gotten this far without having a pretty good idea of what we're getting into, but just like making a skydive, that doesn't make taking the leap any easier. If I were actually standing in that open plane door, trying to uncurl my grip, I imagine that I'd be thinking about my parachute, and about the people I love, and about my parachute, and about all the days that I have ahead of me, and my parachute...

You see, a parachute is designed to make it possible for a person to float through the air, on the wings of the wind, safely and breezily, and to feel secure even in the face of such a daring act. But on reflection, I find that is the wrong analogy for our situation. A parachute is a tool, a kind of savior, for those who are unable to fly. What we need in this moment is faith that indeed, when we step off that edge, we will take flight. Annie Dillard¹ spoke of maple keys...seeds that have an amazing aerodynamic design making it possible for them to float through the air, joyfully twirling toward their germinating purpose. We too have such a design, and are meant to soar toward our purpose, but we can't do it alone. I've read that on a windy day, a maple key might travel as far as thirty-two miles...about fifty kilometres. So the air itself, expressed and received in mysterious wind, plays a huge role in our forward motion. Without that breeze, there would be no floating, no flying. Without the wind, nothing could be carried aloft.

With this two-week focus on the wind...today, the wind at our backs, and next Sunday, the wind in our face...I was tempted to choose "Blowin' in the Wind" for one of our

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7360909-i-was-standing-lost-sunk-my-hands-in-my-pockets>

congregational songs. Though melancholic sentiment of that song wasn't right for today, I do appreciate Bob Dylan's words in the sleeve notes to the album. He wrote: "The first way to answer the questions in the song is by asking them. But lots of people have to first find the wind." First we have to find the wind. What is it that makes it possible for us to soar? What is the name of the wind that partners with our incessant arm-flapping and carries us aloft?

We are here today a very long way from where we were just a few short years ago. Just think of what has happened in the life of this congregation over the past three or four years. You've sold a property, said goodbye to a beloved long-term ministry, entered into a living relationship with the synagogue, and shared your lives two very different interim ministers. On top of all of that, you've been on a long and sometimes disappointing search for a new minister. As for me, three years ago I was just completing seminary, and was about to begin a ministerial internship in Wausau, Wisconsin...at that time still not quite willing to embrace the 'obvious-to-everyone-but-me' fact that parish ministry was my calling. That internship led me to a position in Thunder Bay, Ontario, a foray into Canada that I, perhaps foolishly, thought was but a temporary adventure; I'd never even heard of Peterborough. And here we are today. We've been through a lot of change during these years, and there is more to come.

Thank goodness that there is a wind at our backs that accompanies us through it all. The wind at our backs is that which we are given to carry with us, and that which, often without our active participation, carries us along. I noted that the letter the search committee sent out to y'all announcing this candidating week quoted from my packet where I named the three aspects which are key to my personal theology: Connection, Journey, and Daily Life. You'll notice that 'wind' is not mentioned there! But still, the wind I speak of today touches my theology in all three of those places...in that, as we continue on our journeys, the wind connects us to what has gone before us, helping us to get through our days and nights, breathing into us an energy and a vision that sustains us and gives us hope.

My personal theology is deeply influenced by process thought, a philosophy that maintains that our becoming is greatly determined by what we inherit from our past... the wind of history, the wind of tradition, the breath of our ancestors. It is this moving force that is so beautifully acknowledged and honoured in some religions of Africa...in ritual libations to the ancestors...in order "to remember and honour those who walked and worked before us and thus paved the path down which we now walk."² With less than high ceremony, but still, with deep respect and gratitude, today I pour a few verbal libations for our ancestors.

In gratitude for our Unitarian Universalist movement...to the martyrs and the heretics, to those who have been willing to step outside of custom and norm and to forge new paths, to

² Karenga, M. *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* (Los Angeles, California, University of Sankore Press, 1997), p. 81 (<http://www.christocentric.com/Kwanzaa/ancestor.htm>)

those who have given tirelessly of themselves in the service of liberal religion, I give homage. We stand today in the shadow of these thousands, who had the commitment and the courage and the foresight to prepare a way for us. Their vision continues to propel and inspire us, even as we continue to break new ground for those who will come after us.

In gratitude for the Canadian Unitarian Council...to those prophetic women and men who planted and nurtured the vision of Unitarianism and Universalism in Canada, to these loyalists and pioneers, these immigrants from England, and Ireland, and Iceland, these stone cutters and railroad builders...whose work and passion still carry us, I give homage. There is a collective breeze blowing across this land, fuelled by the five thousand-some members and forty-some ministers of the CUC, and it is this breeze, in part, that has encouraged me to settle in Canada. It is a breeze laden with courage and optimism, and I have benefited from the feel of it on my face during the two years I've been in Thunder Bay.

And to those free spirits who settled here in this place and who bravely set out to establish a Unitarian presence in Peterborough...to Bill and Ann Jex and to Alice and Ed Adams and their abiding lights that continue to shine...I give homage. I cannot yet presume to know much of the history of the Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough. What I do know is that we stand here today because of the efforts of hundreds who have given of themselves over the years. We are touched and moved by something, like the wind, that we did not create. I join you midstream, and while I can sense the force of the current, I can never fully know the waters that merged and collected upstream. I offer my gratitude for these currents.

To the Ministerial Search Committee, to Arthur and Sue and Kathy and Marian and Frances and Erica and Susannah, to those who served on the search committee last year, and to those who served on the search committee BOTH years, I give homage. They, along with those who acted to provide interim ministers for you for these past two plus years, have huffed and puffed and blown as hard as they could to insure that the next step would 'fall into place' for this Fellowship. They may not think of themselves as ancestors, at least not yet, but every gift of time and love that they have given is now part of the 'what has been' in the life of this congregation. I stand in admiration of their accomplishments.

Beyond these great ancestors to whom we offer veneration and gratitude, there is another beautiful aspect of being blown by the wind, and that is the company we keep as we journey along. I'm sure you've all seen, and perhaps even been stopped in your tracks to watch, an eddy of leaves creating a whirlwind of excitement as they bob and dive, feeding off one another's enthusiasm. This kind of connection to our present makes the journey not only bearable, but fun! As Annie Dillard said, if we are maple keys falling, the least we can do is to twirl, and to twirl together is much better than to twirl alone! In this community, we find others with different waft and wail, different size and color, different gift and offering. We are

somehow bolstered by the very fact that we are in it together, that we share this destiny and this vision. It is one of the great things that joins us in religious community, the presence of others who will accompany us and support us. Peter's newsletter article this month reminds us that we are a congregation that comes together in friendship, willing to expose ourselves not only to the wind itself, but to one another. It is not always easy to enter the stream, to allow oneself to be swept up in the excitement and to merge with a community, but the rewards are great and our combined efforts more powerful than anything we can accomplish alone.

As you know, I'm from Minneapolis, and although I am not a great sports fan, I have on occasion been to the Hubert Humphrey Metrodome to watch a Twins game. Like I said, I'm not much of a sports fan, so I honestly don't know how common this experience is, but there is nothing like the moment of leaving such a stadium. It is as if, while spending those few hours in the company of thousands, a mighty breath has gathered and infused everyone who is there, so that when the crowd, as one body, heads outside, each person is literally blown out the stadium doors. In community, we repeatedly inhale and exhale together, building a torrent of air that carries us forward. This is the wind of community, the wind that both enjoins us with others, and the common breath and exhalation that empowers us and sustains us.

You know, the wind tells a story, a story that we inherit and adapt as we make it our own. Each of us has a history, a past, a composite of experiences that inform who we are and the decisions we make. Over this coming week, I expect that I will begin to understand who you are as I hear of your experiences, and you will begin to see who I am. Some of us have recently blown into this community, some have been here since its inception; some of you help to stir up the wind, others prefer to calm it down. Yet whatever our roles or history, we're here in it together. A friend of mine leads a great breathing meditation in which she reminds us, as we breathe in and out, that the atoms that are entering our lungs have just recently been in the lungs of others in the room, and that what we are breathing out is being shared with those next to us. This air is a mix of what has been exhaled and inhaled by our neighbours, and by our enemies, and by those on other continents and in other times. In her book, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, Kathleen Norris says, 'Walking in this wind is like staring at the ocean. I have a sense of being at home on this planet, my blood so like the sea in composition, my every cell partaking of air.'³ My every cell partaking of air. We walk in the wind of our inheritance and the wind of our community, and we are reminded of our deep connections. We hear the stories on the wind and we write our own into that timeless breeze.

³ Findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_n22_v111/ai_15699992

One of my seminary professors, Rosemary Radford Ruether, required that every paper end with a section called “so what,” as if to say, ‘yadda, yadda yadda....okay, you said all that, but what difference does it make? So what?’

For me, the ‘so what’ of this message is that as we consider entering into covenant with one another, we remember that we do not come to this venture without resources and without support. Many of us come to this moment with an unflagging hope, but let’s not forget that few things in life stand alone and pure. Alongside our hope there co-exists uncertainty and doubt, and we do well to recognize that. We carry our humanity with us, and as humans we have experienced imperfection and disappointment, so the fear of failure is present with us even as we look forward to a promising future. The ‘so what’ is that we can trust that behind us stands a great company of ancestors, whispering to us their support, blowing their blessing upon us...a mighty wind that has paved a way for us and that wants nothing more than for us to succeed in this adventure together, to continue to create a vital liberal religious community for Peterborough and the Kawarthas, a community where we can all grow and flourish and make a difference in the world.

The ‘so what’ is that behind and alongside us stand a host of other congregations, in Canada and around the world, who have made a similar journey and who are ready and willing to show us the way. Many of them have been through years, even centuries, of professional ministry, and they have a lot to teach us. We can inherit and learn from the rush of experience that they have fashioned. We can trust that they will be there for us, even as we are willing to lend them a hand in turn.

And perhaps most importantly, we can trust that through this process, through all the joys and tribulations, we have each other...to rustle up gentle support when our arms grow tired, to give us challenging gusts when we hit the doldrums, and to bring out the nor’easters when we’re heading in the wrong direction. This community can help us to be realistic about our limitations while never letting us lose hope in our potential to transcend those limitations. Our life is imbued with the blessings of the wind at our backs, a tail wind that will ease us through this new beginning and through all the changes to come, if we but trust it. This is not about a stomach-losing headlong dive out of a plane, with or without a parachute. This is about trusting that we have the ability, in great part because of our ancestors and our companions, to navigate the journey of flight with the help of a constant wind. We may not be able to see it, but we can feel it, and we can have faith in its ability to uphold and renew us. With each movement, a reassuring breeze. With each step, a wind of encouragement. May we have the faith to trust its presence, and in the words of an old Irish blessing, may the wind be always at our back.

Blessed be and amen.

The Wind In Our Face
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
Rev. Julie Stoneberg
May 6, 2007

My eyes already touch the sunny hill,
going far ahead of the road I have begun.
So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;
It has its inner light, even from a distance –

and changes us, even if we do not reach it,
into something else, which hardly sensing it, we already are;
a gesture waves us on, answering our own wave...
but what we feel is the wind in our faces.

I love this Rilke poem. I first heard it as part of a curriculum, *Living By Heart*, which was created by the Rev. Dr. Laurel Hallman and the late Harry Scholefield. The curriculum is, in part, about building a spiritual practice based in memorizing words of wisdom that will then shape our knowing. In fact, working with this curriculum started me on the path of memorizing poems as part of my own spiritual practice. If my memory serves me correctly (which I must admit it rarely does!) Rev. Hallman found a deep connection with this particular poem at a time when she was making a ministerial transition, and it nourished her spirit when the future was difficult to see. Whether we face the future with hope or doubt, with great anticipation or with dread, whether we can see where we're going or whether the path is murky and brambled, it remains out there. As long as we are living, we have a future in this world. We turn our faces toward the wind and that future waves us on, whispering to us, beckoning us, and though we don't know what it will bring, it has already changed us.

The future has been particularly present with us this week. It has been a constant subtext, if not the intentional focus, of all of the meetings and conversations we've shared. It is present in the questions we've asked one another, questions that have begun with the queries, "How do you see...?" and "How would you envision...?" and "Looking forward to next year, what would you...?" I asked these questions of you, and you asked them of me...each of us screwing up our faces and our imaginations as we tried to picture what might lie ahead.

And not only this week...for truly the future has been present in all of the work that this congregation has done leading up to this moment. If Rilke is right, it is our awareness of the future that changes us...that is, when we realize that we're working toward something, and

when we keep that picture in view, it changes how we behave, and affects all of our decisions, in the present moment.

You may be sick and tired of all this talk about wind, finding it to be just a lot of 'hot air.' But if I'm to be your minister, you should know that I love the use of analogy and metaphor. I believe that ideas and meanings found in images and stories touch us more deeply because they can enter through our minds and our senses rather than only through our brains. But I'm also aware that sometimes an analogy goes too far; we run out of parallels and similarities when trying to compare things that are essentially different.

Last week I mentioned the folk song "Blowin' in the Wind," a song that may have inspired the title for the 2003 mockumentary, *A Mighty Wind*. Did you happen to see this? It was done by the same folks who did *Waiting for Guffman*, and *Best in Show*, and is about three 'has been' groups that come together to perform in a folk music reunion on national television. The title song, *A Mighty Wind*, suggests that the political activism of their heyday was merely "blowin' you and me" ...that presumably the wind is nothing but hot air, and is blowing us around as if we were puppets. This is precisely where the wind analogy breaks down for me.

Last Sunday, I talked about a sustaining wind created by our history and our tradition, and today, I'm suggesting that there is a fresh spring-like breeze that calls us toward our future. The wind analogy breaks down if we think we have no agency in this situation, because we are not just leaves or maple keys that have no choice but to move where the wind takes us. Our arms may not be wing-like, our bodies may be less that aerodynamic, but our attempts at flying, and the wind we create by flapping our arms, does make a difference.

What I mean to say is that we can look to our past with gratitude and we can look to our future with anticipation, but we must live in the now. Even while keeping an eye on the "what will be," we must be present, not only to our own reactions and choices, but to those of everyone around us. We must look with clear eyes on what is real and true, and make decisions about what we can do and how we should do it. We can ride the wind of history and tradition, and we can set out sails into the wind of the future, but we shouldn't give over total control to them. Naomi Shihab Nye concludes her poem "The Art of Disappearing" with the words... "Walk around feeling like a leaf, knowing you could tumble any second. Then decide what to do with your time." There is an action, a decision required of us.

So, what are we to do with our time together? I cannot even begin to predict exactly what we will do together, and am not so sure the details are all that important. Certainly, we will have goals, tangible goals that may include things like congregational social justice projects, a growing and committed membership imbued with volunteerism, and a pledge income that will sustain the annual budget. We need goals in order to structure our activities and to keep focused on the needs and dreams of this community. But I also believe that it is

more important HOW we spend our time together than WHAT we do together. This is the paradox of the wind in our faces...it calls us toward something, in the future, that requires that we act in the present moment and in our present place. It changes us into something that we already are.

I've often recalled a conversation at a potluck table during my first visit to Thunder Bay. One of the congregants said, "What I want is to be a better person. That's why I come to church, and that's what I want a minister to help me to do." Her comments have been instrumental in both my sense of calling and my work in Thunder Bay. We do not come together as a religious community in order to have staff and buildings, we do not come together as a religious community in order to have fancy signs and advertisements, we do not come together as a religious community in order to grow Unitarianism, we do not even come together to have ministers, although all of these things might be important to us. Ultimately we come together in order that we might become better persons, so that everything we touch will also be better. We come together in order to be challenged to grow and to learn, and to do all of that in ways that are both healing and energizing for our connections with each other and with the planet. Changing ourselves is how we make a difference in the world.

I have spent a good part of my adulthood resisting both the Protestant and the Scandinavian work ethics (I got a double dose) which preach that one must be productive in order to be worthwhile. But as I age, I find that it is not so much this ethic itself that I resist, but the product that is implied. For me, the product this ethic speaks of is tangible... it was hard physical work that produces measurable results. Now, don't get me wrong; I love results. There is hardly any greater satisfaction than being able to check something off my to-do list. But let's just consider for a moment a few things that might be on a to-do list that would produce that illusive 'heaven on earth' that we dream of. What if you woke up one morning to a 'to do' list that required you to:

- Love everyone and choose to do the loving thing all the time
- Always practice what you preach always
- Never sit down in the face of injustice; give of yourself and your resources until justice rolls down like waters
- Become perfect.
- Attain enlightenment.

Let's face it, if our list contained this kind of hyperbole, we would never be able to cross anything off. We may have to accept the fact that we will never attain perfection (darn it!) But we can break this list down into manageable pieces. Maybe all we can do today is to try, just for a moment, to put ourselves in the shoes of someone who has a very different reality than ours. Maybe all we can do today is promise to give one more hour this month to the church.

Maybe all we can do today is smile at a passing stranger. Maybe all we can do today is to get out of bed. That's good. Do it. Cross it off your list and then add it two-fold to your list again for tomorrow...and the day after that and that day after that.

I have recently been reading Anne LaMott's book, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*. In it, she talks about the experience of really being love or feeling love, and how incredibly transitory and passing it is. She expresses her appreciation for a friend, David, who has built a church inside himself, a church he calls the Church of 80% Sincerity. She quotes him as saying: "We in the Church of Eighty Percent Sincerity do not believe in miracles, but we do believe that you have to stay alert, because good things happen. When God opens a door, you have to put your foot in. Eighty percent sincerity is about as good as it's going to get. So is eighty percent compassion. Eighty percent celibacy. So twenty percent of the time, you just get to be yourself."

LaMott continues, "When [David] talks about unconditional love, he gives you a new lease on life, because the way he explains it, you may, for the first time, believe that even you could taste of this. As he explains it, in the Church of 80% Sincerity, everyone has come to understand that unconditional love is a reality, but with a shelf life of about eight to ten seconds. Instead of beating yourself up because you feel it only fleetingly, you should savour those moments when it appears. As David puts it, we might say to our beloved, 'Honey, I've been having these feelings of unconditional love for you for the last eight to ten seconds.' Or, 'Darling, I'll love you till the very end of dinner.'⁴

So, we're not going to be perfect, but this doesn't mean that we don't get to experience moments of perfection, of compassion, of unconditional love... moments that promise us that a better future is possible. The idea being that if we can savour these moments, if we can really feel them in our bones and get comfortable with them, we learn something about them, and can recreate them tomorrow...maybe just for a second longer...but that's huge! In such a moment, that wind in our face gathers momentum and influence. I did a little figuring, and if everyone on this planet felt love in their hearts for just one more second each day, given the current population of about 6.7 billion people, (if my calculations are right,) we would create 77,500 days or 212 years of pure love...that's huge! What we do matters. We are not just blowin' in the wind. The wind in our face provides that glimmer of hope, that passing vision of peace and justice, that scent of possibility, that carries us forward and changes who we are in the present moment, reminding us that we can be better, different. To borrow (and slightly adapt) a line from a Billy Collins poem, I believe that "our future is the breeze that blows through the whole scene of our lives, stirring everything that it touches..."

⁴ Lamott, Anne, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (Riverhead Books, New York, 2005), 109-111.

I told the kids last Sunday that one of the things I love about being a minister is that it calls me to be a better person, in every moment, in every decision. But, becoming a minister did not automatically make me a better person, and being a minister does not make it any easier for me to make the right choices more often, but it does remind me more often and more loudly of who I want to be. That is, it helps me to feel that wind of hope and possibility in my face. I'm humbled by that wind. But when I find that "set a perfect example, always" creeps onto my 'to-do' list, I am beyond humbled, I am incapacitated. Our work in the world can't possibly be to be perfect, because humans are not made to be perfect. Our work in the world is to take this moment and do the best that we can with it. Our work is to make progress toward something that is beyond us. To do that is a huge accomplishment, worthy of praise and celebration...and it provides the impetus to do it again with the next moment. Each moment lived prepares the way for the future, so each moment lived with compassion or joy or healing energy or learning creates more of that in the future.

There are going to be a lot of new moments here in Peterborough. No matter what happens with the vote today, things will shift. Some things will come to an end, and new things will arise, continuing the cycle of life that is the Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough. Nothing ever ends, but things continue. How they continue is up to us, because what matters is what we choose to do in each of our arising moments.

All this talk about wind and change may make you feel a little weak in the knees, a little shaky on your feet. But don't worry. The house will hold. This house of fellowship will withstand the winds of time and influence precisely because we're willing to find the wind, to look it in the face, and to ask the hard questions. The house will hold. We are safe here, but we are not protected from the wind. The house will hold because we deem to speak to the wind and then to ride its currents. The house will hold because, as the children's book today tells us, even when the wind stops, even when today is over, the moon will guide us into our dreams, the sun will begin a new day for someone else, and the planet will continue to spin. Nothing ends even as everything changes.

In every moment we are asked to jump out of a plane, to take risks that may upset the status quo, to do things a little differently in order that things may be different. If we're alive, moving into the future is impossible to avoid, but what that future holds is up to us. We grasp that which we cannot hold onto...a false sense of security, an insistence on keeping things the way they are.

May we learn to uncurl our fingers and release our hold, if only just a little bit, and to enjoy the ride. The future awaits.

Amen.