

A Sacred Pilgrimage, by Perry R. Montrose  
Sermon at First Unitarian Society in Newton on 9-23-12

In the very early 1900's in Kiev during the time of pogroms, Herschel Schneider was conscripted into the Russian army. For a Jew, this likely meant death so Herschel decided to escape. In the middle of the night he made a long dangerous journey on foot through the marshes to get to safety across the border. Eventually he made it to New York and later his wife and children were able to join him. Although they escaped dangerous persecution in Russia, they still faced harsh anti-Semitism in the United States.

Herschel was a carpenter and Jews took off the Saturday Sabbath, while their Christian counterparts rested on Sunday. One Sunday, upon seeing a Jewish roofer at work, a Christian worker was outraged and hit the man over the head with a hammer. Herschel grabbed the Christian man and threw him off the roof. That night a mob arrived at Herschel's house with guns and demanded he come outside. With his wife begging him not to, Herschel did step onto the porch and said, "Here I am." No shots were fired and the next day Herschel led a march of Jews carrying the Torah down the neighborhood street to say, "We are here, proud, and not going away." Herschel Schneider was my great-grandfather, my father's grandfather.

That family story is one of many that instilled a message about standing up for yourself and your beliefs. It is a complex story for me, one fraught with violence and questions of appropriate responses to such situations. Thankfully, the "fight for your rights" message was combined with examples of unbelievable generosity to fellow human beings, both relatives and strangers.

Growing up and to this day, my parents' house always seems to have an open door where clients come for an appointment and stay for breakfast, friends are welcome to stay for dinner and others find a home for whatever time they need. An uncle, a great uncle, a cousin or two, and a Hungarian veterinarian who was a colleague of my father's all lived with us one or more times when I was a kid. There were always many other relatives around and I am the oldest of five, all of us with unique strong personalities. There were always three generations interacting at anytime with openness, authenticity, arguing, fighting, laughing, and loving. You could say that my family life prepared me well for Unitarian Universalist congregational life.

My mother grew up in Belfast, Northern Ireland and her side of the family was Episcopalian, Quaker, and had a branch of Armenian Jews. My mother never theologically connected with Christianity and felt a personal connection to Judaism when she went through an Orthodox conversion before marrying my father. It is interesting to see her follow religious practice more than my father, who would gladly tell you he is an atheist but a cultural Jew. Heritage is part of who we are, but there is something powerful in a chosen faith.

Raised as a Reform Jew and Bar Mitzvah'd I always appreciated the family heritage, but as an older teenager realized I did not connect with Jewish theology and had real issues with the sexism, vengeance, chosen people concept, and other ideologies. I rebelled against the religion of my childhood and went on my own spiritual search. As many of you do, I have an adult story of discovering Unitarian Universalism and being surprised at finding a faith community that represented my values and the way in which I lived my life. Ironically, it was after becoming

deeply involved in Unitarian Universalism and a religious educator in this faith that I was able to reconnect with Jewish theology and even some practices. I saw the religion through a completely different lens and felt comfortable to draw from the aspects I connected with and leave the rest aside with understanding.

I vividly remember sitting in a Yom Kippur service with my family and while *Kol Nidrei* was so movingly played on the cello, having the most amazing spiritual experience of recognizing my deep connection to the meaning of Jewish survival, family heritage, theologies of forgiveness and doing good in the world, mixed with the separation of my own spiritual identity. From that moment on, I was able to engage in Jewish customs and texts in a new way, while embracing my co-identity as a Unitarian Universalist. This process has continued to evolve and makes me whole. These identities are entwined for me in a beautiful way that complement each other and challenge me to grow as a person.

This Rosh Hashanah I heard a Reform rabbi speak about modern liberal Jews holding the religious stories with the realities of the world we live in. He said Reform Jews hold the bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. It made me wonder what we hold in our hands as Unitarian Universalists. We certainly hold on tight to that newspaper, or maybe it's our computer mouse or touch screen, or the volume control for NPR. But what about the other hand? We might hold the bible, as metaphor, but we draw from many traditions. We might reach for the Koran or the Eight-fold Path as we try to understand life's mysteries. Of course, as Unitarian Universalists, we view all these texts as springboards to more discussion, not answers dictated. We also learn from humanist teachings, great poets and writers, and earth-centered traditions that connect our spirituality and physical being to nature.

Maybe most importantly, we each hold our own direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder. We share common experiences with all human beings, childhood to maturity and youth to age, as the reading said. Yet we feel the journey and move through it with our unique perspectives and presence.

If we draw from many sources and come with all of these differing backgrounds, experiences, ideas, and beliefs, what does it mean to be in Unitarian Universalist community? We have our seven Principles that articulate our common values. For the children, we say one word to represent each of these – Respect, Kindness, Spirit, Truth, Voice, Peace, and Nature. These Principles give us a sense of how we live in the world and what is important to us, but they do not quite say everything about why we are in this building this morning and what it means to be a part of the FUSN community. We come to discover more about ourselves, to simply pause in a busy week, to feel whatever mystery we connect with, to share the happenings of our lives with others who care, to support one another, to mark and celebrate life passages, and to express ideas in a place where they will be embraced and reflected upon, not dismissed.

It is not easy to hold so much diversity of thought and feeling in an open expressive community. This is why we so importantly state that we are a covenantal faith. My Jewish ancestors made a covenant with God. Our covenant here has a different translation. Let us imagine for a moment that we define God as that which is sacred in us, in others, and between us. Our covenant, in that case, would be to uphold our own integrity, respect what is important to others, and honor the

sacred space that holds connection between us. Our covenant is the way in which we are going to be together and do this.

M. Scott Peck begins his book *The Road Less Traveled* by stating, “Life is difficult.” Well, being in authentic, vibrant, healthy Unitarian Universalist community can be difficult. Peck goes on to say, “What makes life difficult is that the process of confronting and solving problems is a painful one...[they] evoke in us frustration...or sadness or guilt...or anger or fear...These are uncomfortable feelings...yet it is in this whole process of meeting and solving problems that life has its meaning...Love must be manifested in confrontation as much as in beatific acceptance.”

So how do we do this? How do we be authentic, face our differences, but embrace our coming together and actually decide what kind of light bulbs to put in the fixtures? We are here in relationship. That is the heart of the matter underneath everything we do.

John Gottman recently published *The Science of Trust* in which he goes into great detail about what makes marriages happy and lasting, or not. He has a diagram called “The Sound Relationship House” that contains seven elements.

Here is my translation of the elements of “The Sound Relationship House” in regard to Unitarian Universalist community:

- “Build love maps” means get to know one another. Know who is in the sanctuary with you, starting with where we each have come from and what we might be doing with our lives, but eventually moving to knowing what that person’s hopes, fears, struggles, questions, and beliefs are.
- “Share fondness and admiration” means appreciating what that person is telling you about him or her self. Before we ask all the questions and critique, let’s appreciate each other’s stories.
- “Turn towards” is a big one. It means that when it feels difficult or we disagree that we stay at the table and turn towards the other person, rather than away or against. Turning towards is sharing our own feelings and needs while also acknowledging those of the other person, to find the place of connection and compromise.
- “The positive perspective” means we are going to assume the best and know that what someone expresses is not aimed at us, but is coming from within them. We trust that people mean well, but might not always be capable of expressing themselves well, so we ask questions and don’t make assumptions.
- “Manage conflict” is interesting because it says that we must realize that conflict is inevitable. It is not a question of avoiding misunderstanding, but what you do when it happens. It is the “then what” that is most important. If we stay away from polarizations and reach for understanding, the dialogues around conflicts move us through them and create another piece of compromise. This is what growing together is all about.
- “Make life dreams come true” and “create shared meaning” are what we really embrace as the identity of our community. Gottman describes meaning as legacy, values, and rituals of connection. When we come together with a feeling of safety, trust, and connection, we are in a place to create meaning together that honors us as individuals and a community.

The Rosh Hashanah Torah reading starts with God calling out to Abraham and Abraham responding, "Here I am." Those simple words represent showing up for each other and what is most sacred to us.

Research has shown that essentially we are wired for connection as human beings. Our survival has depended upon it. The great individualist theory of every man or woman for him or her self is a myth. Yes, we need to have a sense of self to be healthy, but our life's meaning is in being connected to other people and having a sense of community. What we really want to know when we are upset is, "Are you there for me and am I important to you?"\* Our congregational home is a place where we bring our fears, hopes, and expectations. We want to know if this is a place where we can count on people. And the response is, "Here I am."

When we are in covenantal relationship we discover that we are here for one another in joyful times and during struggles. It is this trust that makes a congregation feel like a home.

Unitarian poet Emily Dickinson wrote:

*Eden is that old-fashioned House  
We dwell in every day  
Without suspecting our abode  
Until we drive away.*

When you drive away from this old-fashioned house today may you notice this community as a home because it allows for the exploration of your full self and mutually sharing with others the ongoing process of life, a sacred pilgrimage. Held so together because we have said to one another, "Here I am." May it be so again and again.

\*Research and theory from Dr. Sue Johnson, author of *Hold Me Tight*