

The Road or the Simple Highway

[This sermon was preceded with the singing of *Ripple* by Robert Hunter.]

As a way of getting into our topic for today, which is my riff on Robert Hunter's "Ripple," I'm going to revisit just a portion of my sermon from two weeks ago on Martin Luther King Sunday.

One of the many "what ifs" of American history is that of what if Martin Luther King had not chosen the road he did--the road of ministry in the African American church, out of which he emerged into the leader of the civil rights movement from the mid-1950s on through the 1960s until his death at age 39 in 1968. Maybe another leader would have emerged, as the times were right for Dr. King's ministry and message and actions. We'll never really know. But I find the matter intriguing nonetheless. It's one of those "does the person make history, or does history make the person?" kind of questions.

According to his biographers, the ministry was not Dr. King's first career choice. He grew up in the large shadow cast by his very large in stature father, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Senior; who as the minister of Atlanta, Georgia's Ebenezer Baptist Church was the one of the most prominent and highly respected members of Atlanta's African American community; and was well regarded by many whites in that still segregated city in the 1940s and 50s.

For all the love and respect he had for his father, young Martin felt the need, quite understandably, to move out of his shadow and establish an identity of his own. He initially resisted becoming another "Reverend King." Instead he considered a career in law. Maybe, had he followed that path, he would have become a civil rights lawyer; and perhaps worked for the NAACP alongside Thurgood Marshall. Who knows?

Granted, for Dr. King such a career would not have been a *simple highway*. It would have had its challenges, and its mountains to climb; but it most likely would have been safer for him and his family than the road he chose. Nevertheless, the road he chose was to return to the South, after completing his graduate education up here in the North, and take up the ministry. In the African American Church of that time, young Martin saw opportunities to

work in and through that institution for the greater cause of racial justice. I doubt, at the outset, even he saw where that choice and that road would take him; but our nation was transformed as a result of the road Dr. King chose.

The song *Ripple* wasn't written until a couple of years after Dr. King's death, so he obviously never heard it. Whether or not he would have related to it is hard to say—he didn't exactly seem like the Dead-Head type. Neither was I for that matter. But I still like this song of theirs, written by Robert Hunter.

Like many such metaphorically rich songs or poems this one can be heard and interpreted on a number of levels. And its line, "There is a road, no simple highway," is one I take as a reference to the choices we make that guide and direct the courses of our lives. It's about seeing a script for yourself and then deciding if that script, that simple highway, is the one you really want to follow, or do you choose some other road instead.

With this as backdrop, I'd like to offer a meditation, if you will, on this very enigmatic song. Frankly, I'd never paid it much attention until several years ago when, on one of my Bay Area trips I had lunch with a gentleman named Dennis McNally. Mr. McNally has written what I consider to be the better biographies on Jack Kerouac, so of course I had to meet him.

In addition to our sharing that common interest, our other point of commonality is that Dennis' now deceased father was a Unitarian Universalist minister; and served the UU Church in Haverhill, MA for a time, which was where Dennis grew up. After writing his Kerouac bio, for much of the 1980s and 90s, Mr. McNally was the publicist and advance man for The Grateful Dead. He's written an outstanding book about the history of that group and its place in American culture called—not surprisingly *A Long Strange Trip*. It actually made the NYT Best Seller list for a few weeks.

Dennis and his wife, Susana Millman, live in San Francisco. They were in Lowell back in November for book tour Susana had after she published a coffee-table type book of photographs she took during her years as the Grateful Dead's photographer. It's a coffee table type of book titled *Alive with the Dead*. I'll put it out during coffee hour for any of you who might want to flip through it. (Try not to spill coffee on it.)

Mr. McNally and I first met over ten years ago, and began what has become a good, ongoing friendship. I brought along my copy of his *Long, Strange Trip* back then for him to sign, and after inscribing a few personal words to me, Dennis wrote the line: “There is a road, no simple highway...” and signed his name. I don’t know if he was trying to give me a specific message then, or if he just liked the passage. The whole sentence goes: “There is a road, no simple highway, between the dawn and the dark of night.”

As just noted I cannot actually be considered a Dead Head. For all of my interest in the Beat Generation era I never quite followed through to the Hippie scene. It’s probably a factor of age; I was too young to be a Beat and then felt too old to be a Hippie. In fact, until I’d read Mr. McNally’s book I don’t believe I could have named even five Grateful Dead songs. But, like I said, I found myself quite taken with this one. It is full of metaphors that seem to double back on themselves. Like Don MacLean’s American Pie, I’ll bet there have been Masters Theses written about “what this song really means,” which must give Robert Hunter a good laugh.

In its broadest interpretation I see the passage as a metaphor for the life journey: Birth and death—the dawn and the dark of night. The “road” and the “highway” refer the choices we’re given after our personal dawn, or morning, has broken: We can make our own road, deliberately seeking purpose, and intention, and meaningful engagement with the life that is all around us. Or one can take the “simple highway” and cruise along in a largely unreflective manner, living in accordance with the general societal assumptions of one’s day and seeking to live up to whatever standards of “success” one’s culture may dictate.

As we saw at the outset, it is usually those who choose the road over the simple highway who change the course of history, and even the direction of the highway itself. To go back to the time and place with which I opened for just a moment, Rosa Parks could have chosen the simple highway when she got on the bus in Birmingham, Alabama on that first day of December in 1955. She could have acquiesced to the general societal assumptions of her day about the “proper place” of persons of color. But by the simple act of sitting in the front of the bus she opted instead for the hard road, and the road to racial justice in the nation ended up taking a decisive turn as a result. That road, of course, is still ongoing; especially at this point in our nation’s history.

To give these words yet another angle and bring them close to home here, I believe the reason people seek out religious communities like the one we seek to offer here is because they are looking for the road, and not the simple highway when it comes to their spiritual journey. They are looking for a place of meaning and hope and human engagement. They are looking for a communion of people and ideals and values, that expects and demands something of them, and to which they can freely give something of themselves. They are looking for a place where they choose, with both joy and with serious deliberation the spiritual road they wish to take, rather than the prescribed simple highway of what the founder of American Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing, called a "second hand faith." You, right here and now, are called to offer and to be one such a religious community as you now seek a minister to lead you on that road—a road for those who will not settle for a second hand faith.

There are a couple of other lines from Hunter's song that I think demonstrate well the yin and the yang, or the dual truths, if you will, of how we approach the liberal religious journey as Unitarian Universalists. I won't be so presumptuous or chauvinistic to suggest that other faith communities are inimical to this approach, but I am speaking here to a UU congregation.

One line says: "That path is for your steps alone" while the other says, "Reach out your hand if your cup be empty." However at odds with each other these two lines may seem at first, we affirm both. Yes, we do believe that each person ultimately has to seek and find his or her truth. That path is indeed for your steps alone. But at the same time, you do not walk alone. We do not send you on that search empty handed or with an empty cup. Reach out your hand if you are feeling empty or confused or questioning, for there are other hands here that will join with you on our common way. "That path is for your steps alone...reach out your hand if your cup be empty." Those lines are two sides of the same coin in our UU communities.

Then there's the line: "If you should stand then who's to guide you? If I knew the way I would take you home." That, I believe, is the implicit message of the covenant in which we share. We offer our guidance to one another in our homeward journeys of the mind and spirit, however sure or unsure we may be of the way itself.

I think on that line, "If I knew the way I would take you home" when I consider of my own journey in ministry and the responsibilities that go with

it. In a more orthodox faith tradition the minister—or religious leader by whatever title is used—is expected to “know the way” and help take his or her followers home.

In our UU tradition, the minister is more of a fellow traveler on a shared spiritual journey than someone who already knows “the way.” Granted, the minister has been accorded a level of education, and a certain set of skills and abilities, that equip her or him for the tasks of the professional ministry. We clergy types of all stripes have to have those kinds of things if our ministries are to be successful. But the relationship between the minister and the congregation in our UU tradition is one of fellow seekers after meaning, and purpose and spiritual depth in living. And you are expected to be as much a part of that process as the minister who serves you. Together we look for the way that takes us home. I hope you will think on these things as you settle a minister.

I’ll throw in one more piece of self-disclosure as to how I relate to this song as I go about my minister life. Sometimes, in preparing a sermon, I’ll ask myself, Okay do these words “glow with the gold of sunshine” or are they more like a tune “played on the harp unstrung.” It’s usually some of both. But whichever the case, do know that I, too, am someone on this road seeking my own way to wherever home may be; a fellow traveler with you.

I’ll hold up one more verse from *Ripple* before I move to a close. I’ve already used some of it. Here’s the whole verse:

Reach out your hand if your cup be empty
 If your cup is full, may it be again.
 Let it be known there is a fountain
 That was not made by the hand of man.

If Mr. Hunter were writing the song today he might make it a little more gender inclusive by saying the fountain “is not made by human hands,” but it’s still the same idea. Sometimes you’re going to come here with your cup empty; at other times it will be so full that you’ll come here having plenty to share with others. But whatever the state of your cup I do believe that ultimately we draw from a fountain not made by human hands. It is that Ultimate Source of All Life that is both within and beyond each of us.

However we each envision and name the Source or the Ground of All Life, the Blessed and Holy Spirit of Life about which we sing every Sunday, we come here to partake of it in order that we may walk well on our chosen roads—the ones we walk as individuals and the ones we walk as a part of this covenanted religious community.

We UUs have spent more time than we need to, I feel, contending over what the right and proper name of this fountain should be—sometimes to the point that we never get around to actually drinking from it. I think we have a deep and rich fountain here to refresh and nurture each and all of us on our life journeys. I hope we can each and all partake well of this fountain. As for its precise name, well, once again I'm with Robert Hunter:

“I don't know, don't really care; Let there be songs to fill the air.”

One more base to touch now: As I said earlier in the service, I'm grateful to Vicki Merriam, and those who joined with her, to offer what I understand was a wonderful service last Sunday. By the time that service got underway I was fast asleep, having spent two consecutive nights on a bus; while, during the day in between, walking (when it was possible to walk) in the largest crowd I've ever been in, and been a part of. And all of it in a vast ocean of pink hats.

I refer, of course, to the Women's March (which certainly had its share of men) in Washington, DC a week ago yesterday. It was good to be with a delegation of members and friends from this congregation, and such a great number of folks from my former congregation in Nashua.

I can't get into much of a discourse now on all the feelings I came away with following such an incredible experience. I'll offer this: As disaffected as I feel with the current state of the American Presidency—a disaffection I've never felt before, and my memories of our country's Presidents go back to Mr. Eisenhower—I came home feeling good. Being in the midst of the throngs that were there, and then learning of similar kinds of throngs that were gathering in cities and towns across America, did give me the assurance that this is still my country, and it's still worth staying in the struggle for.

Feeling good, however, is not the same thing as being naïve. To return to the song we've been exploring this morning, for those of us who seek to stand

on the side of love, for those of us who seek to be agent of that moral arc of the universe bending towards justice, the road ahead is anything but a simple highway. It will be a terribly difficult road at times, as has been well demonstrated in just this past week. The way in which we travel in the days ahead will determine whether we as a society are headed for yet another dawn in the life of our nation, or for the dark of night. I came away from last weekend hopeful that we will choose to work towards yet another dawn rather than surrender to the forces of the dark of night.

Let the words of our closing hymn, then, be a promise we make to each other going forward. They are written by Carolyn McDade, who also gave us the wonderful gift of "Spirt of Life." The hymn is number 346, "Come sing a song with me."

Stephen Edington
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