

Seeking Knowledge in Freedom

a sermon by

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The Humboldt Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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What are we doing here? Why do we come here Sunday after Sunday? Why do we bring our kids? Why do we gather in men's groups and women's groups – in social action efforts and in classes, book groups, workshops and circle suppers?

What are we doing here?

As Unitarian Universalists, we know our individual answers to that question are going to be varied. They are going to look a lot more like a patch of wild prairie than like row upon row of corn.

But if - in all our diversity - we still continue to gather together, there must still be some common motivations that bind us.

I, as your new part-time minister, am particularly interested in what binds us together. So I've looked for clues.

And one of the first things that popped out at me was that nearly every Sunday you read your Aspiration. I understand that this Aspiration has sort of grown up wild from your soil. As a congregation you didn't intentionally plant it – but it's grown and thrived and you've used it now for almost a decade. When I asked the Board about it, they affirmed that their sense is that, this Aspiration, is now indeed at the center of your hearts.

Good. I need to know what's at the center of your hearts and we need to keep clarifying it and deepening it – because (like the revered sage Yogi Berra says): "If we don't know why we're here, it's liable not to happen."

So – according to our Aspiration – We are here to make love bearers of our selves. We're here to quest for truth with serious regularity. We're here to transform our prayers (or the deepest longings of our hearts) into service for humankind and the earth.

And....as we do this work together here on our little Humboldt Wild Prairie reserve....

Our Aspiration says we intend to respond to conflict in non-violent, healing ways because: We are committed to dwelling together in peace.

We are committed to protecting our individual uniqueness and we are going to allow ourselves and one another freedom – as each of us seeks for knowledge.

And in this process of becoming love bearers and questing for truth and answering our own prayers by serving other people and the planet...

In this process...We are going to help one another.

If this Aspiration that has grown up among you truly is a valid expression of your hearts – and I think it is – that's a very good thing because it answers, in one clarifying way, why we are here and why I am here. And that clarity makes what we Aspire for much more likely to become a reality.

We need this statement of clear purpose (and others like it) – or we won't achieve much because we won't even know what we're trying to achieve.

One of the first things I ask people who are thinking of joining this Fellowship or any UU Congregation is: *Do the Principles of our Faith speak to your heart? Does the Aspiration of this Congregation match the Aspiration of your own life?*

If they say Yes (which they often do) – we're in business! We can begin to work together. If they say No – clearly we're not a good fit. And even when we do fit together and become members, the work to which we call ourselves is challenging.

So today, I want to talk with you about the part of our Aspiration that says – we are going to seek knowledge together, in freedom!

Let's talk about seeking knowledge first. Philosophers have wrestled with what this might mean for years.

Classically, many philosophers say there are three kinds of knowledge:

The knowledge that something is true.

The knowledge of how to arrive at a truth.

And the knowledge that comes from acquaintance with someone or some thing.

Bertrand Russell had another approach that I find useful. He said all knowledge is ultimately dependent upon experience, but some of that experience is direct, and some of it is indirect.

For example, if a person feels a pain, she knows by direct experience what that her pain is. If the same person reports what she experienced, the one who reads her report only knows her pain indirectly.

When we Unitarian Universalists list our sources of authority – or the sources that inform our knowledge....the first source we list is our own direct experience of life!

We seek knowledge by direct experience.

Henry David Thoreau refers to this Direct Experience in “Walden” when he says: *I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of life, and to see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, to discover that I had not lived.*

In his Essay “Nature” Ralph Waldo Emerson talks about Direct Experience too. He says:

Our age builds on the sepulchers of those who have gone before us. We write biographies, histories, and criticism of the by-gone “greats”.

The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, very often, only behold God or nature through other people’s eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relationship to the universe? Why should not we also have a poetry and philosophy of insight and a religion by revelation to us, and not just the history of those who have gone before? (adapted)

We Unitarian Universalist surely still value indirect knowledge. As we struggle to bear love, quest for truth, serve others and find a path to wholeness and harmony in life, we still inform our hearts and minds by studying the lives of people who have lived well. We still value the accurate information provided by science and the insight and inspiration provided by the wisdom of all the great religions of the world. – But we don’t just want to read about any of this. We want to experience it. Our lives are grand encounters with the universe – grand experiments in how to live in deeply satisfying and productive ways.

And as we seek to gain knowledge about how to live well – according to the Aspiration of this Fellowship – we allow ourselves and one another freedom. We understand that our lives together are going to look a lot more like a wild prairie than like mile upon mile of corn in straight rows.

But still - it’s oftentimes a challenge to accept the variety of the prairie. It’s a challenge to free ourselves from our own tastes and cultural preferences.

It's a challenge to grant freedom and genuine acceptance to those who are committed to the very same values and principles as we are – but whose religious approaches are quite different.

Finding our own way seems hard enough – never mind calling ourselves to accept the ways of others. But that is what we call ourselves to, because we know - not only does our way not work for other people – but each one of us has to deal with our own direct experience in our own way at our own pace.

Harmony in music does not mean that everyone sings the same note or even sings notes at the same time. It means that each person does his or her part but works together for the same end.

And our Unitarian Universalist faith is that way. We are different instruments. We have different gifts. We're of differing ages and come from different places. We've had different experiences in the web of life. But we are attracted to the same deep values.

Last Wednesday night – Edie and I went to Jambalaya in Arcata to hear a band called Asha Nan. Yemaya and Mike Kimmel and Jeff Thomas who are part of this congregation are members of Asha Nan.

Edie and I absolutely love them and their families and love their band. But wow! Are we from different places in the web of things or what?.

Edie and I both are pretty much white, middle class, old, traditional university style Unitarian Universalists.

The band members are younger, hipper, far more relaxed, far more colorfully dressed and far more counter cultural than Edie and I.

I have to tell you, though, Asha Nan still lights up our hearts.

First of all, the members we know are very open, loving people. They see I'm an old, educated white guy - very different from them – and they don't assume that means I won't appreciate them. They're not into judging people by their covers. They're more into listening for the beat of a heart and looking to see if there's a light in the eye.

Second – the lyrics to the songs they've written are all about my UU Values. They are all about love and justice. But the lyrics are not arranged in any hymn form familiar to me. They're arranged to amazing Caribbean rhythms with horn, keyboard and guitar accompaniments.

So here's one of their basic choruses –

Peace and love you gotta start it on the street
Peace and love you gotta feel it in the beat

From there Yemaya takes off with great vocals calling people to pay attention to their hearts and create positive interactions everywhere in their lives. While she does that, Mike rearranges everyone's insides with percussion riffs that go off like fire works - and Jeff Thomas rumbles bass notes to remind us to keep grounded.

The style of this band and its members does not remind me too much of Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry David Thoreau.

The relationship of these band members to the universe is not built on the sepulchers of the past – but it is absolutely consistent with Thoreau's and Emerson's yearning for all people in our time to have their own experience of the universe and a poetry, philosophy, insight and revelation of their own.

Significant for me with Asha Nan – is that our UU Principles and the Aspiration of this Fellowship is significant for them! Their involvement with the Fellowship gives me hope that our Unitarian Universalist approach really is relevant – and really does have some healing potential in the world. – Not just for people born in the mid 1900s – but also for people born in the later 1900s and for people being born now.

That's a good thing. Because being human on this planet at this time right now is a genuine challenge to our spirits. Good tools, widely useful tools like Unitarian Universalism are desperately needed. For us to maintain our spiritual health we need all the help we can get.

And, according to our Aspiration, in this congregation we are committed to granting ourselves and one another great freedom and acceptance as we seek knowledge about how to meet our human challenge.

I believe if we can truly remember how hard life is for all of us and if we can remember the life changing purpose of this congregation – we will stop and listen deeply to one another with great empathy and support as we share what we have experienced and learned.

Across age differences and racial differences and cultural differences we will connect with one another's hearts and learn to take delight in the fact that we live in a little wild prairie preserve with all kinds of amazing life forms.

And though we will have to be mindful and sensitive because no one is just like we are... I believe we will find it a real blessing not to be lined up like factory farm corn.

Nearly every Sunday, in the Welcome, we hear that the congregation of this Fellowship is intentionally diverse.

Wow! I think, if we keep growing in our ability to really listen to and hear one another, we might really grow in our diversity.

God help us learn to listen! And may the wild prairie preserve be praised.

PLEASE STAND NOW AND JOIN IN SINGING HYMN #142 – Let There be Light

**Extinguishing the Chalice
Closing Words and Closing Song**

And now – for all of us who see God – May God go with us...

For all of us who embrace life – May life return our affection.

And for all of us who seek a right path...

May a way be found and the courage to take it step by step.

Go in peace...

Song

Go from here in peace...Go with love