



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Soul Connections”

© by Morgan Watson, Director of Religious Education

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Centering Thoughts

Our souls yearn for connection with all souls. There are people we think we prefer and others we don't, but half the time that's a lie: We tell ourselves the fairy tale of our hatreds out of fear, but we revisit that tale as it suits us. Deep down, we'd love to love and be loved by all.

Alexandra Katehakis

We must come together in ways that respect the solitude of the soul that avoid the unconscious violence we do when we try to save each other that evoke our capacity to hold another life without dishonoring its mystery never trying to coerce the other into meeting our own needs.

Parker J. Palmer

Sermon “Soul Connections: Stories of An Extrovert’s Lone Journey” (*For a more detailed report of less spiritual takeaways from her sabbatical, please see UUFA’s January Tapestry newsletter.*)

During my recent sabbatical leave period, I wanted to travel alone around the country for six weeks, with the intent of meeting other religious educators at UU churches around the country, exploring the outdoors, and interacting with people in their communities. My hope was to find opportunities to experience community outside of Athens, and I tentatively named my travel project “Exploring Beloved Community through Multi-Generational Events”.

Many of you asked, “Are you excited?” I usually answered that I was, but the truth is that, as the departure date grew nearer, I came to realize this trip was going to be so much more than just educational or fun. And I must have had some intuitive sense that this was to be something more than exciting. Yes, there were belly flutters of excitement and anticipation, but when departure day arrived, so did the emotions.

I was surprised by tears. And I realized an emotion that had been creeping in: FEAR. Fear of the unknown, fear of danger. I had thought of myself as having a pretty vast comfort zone, but I had to acknowledge on this departure day, that my comfort zones were going to be stretched. All the doubts and worry thoughts came flooding in: What if my car breaks down and I have no cell signal? What if someone tries to hurt me? What if I have no place to stay some nights? What if I get too lonely and want to come home?

Driving off, I knew this trip was going to be a spirit quest, a venturing out into the unknown to discover something about myself. And as it turned out, it was the unique encounters with individuals, some of whom I don't expect to ever see again, that had a profound effect on the person I am today.

Here are some of the stories of the souls who touched my heart, guided my passage, and gently nudged me on my way.

Fayetteville, AR: Teresa Shows “Open Curiosity”

Teresa Youngblood serves as Director of Religious Education at the UU Fellowship of Fayetteville, AR. Teresa showed me around the building while we talked about our programs, and I noticed the passion with which she moved about the space, discussing how kids experience that faith community.

Teresa shared with me about her demeanor of open curiosity, an intentional, spiritual practice. The idea that, when so many of the multiple components of the programs we oversee are not entirely under our control, we can embrace the unknowing and wonder about the effects without strict expectations. We can give our blessing and observe its unfolding outcome. Teresa was just one of many religious educators whose ideas inspired me along the way.

Janis and the Pet Burial

Janis, a member of the UU Fellowship of Fayetteville, had kindly agreed to host me for the night in her home. In the morning, Janis shared that her dog had died overnight, and that her son would be arriving soon to help bury the dog in the yard. Having already had breakfast, she encouraged me to make myself at home, then headed back outside to make preparations for the burial.

As I sat down at the kitchen table to eat, I realized the spot I had chosen was in the direct glare of the sun. So I shifted to the next seat over and became aware then that I had a direct view of the scene outside. I watched as Janis and her son took turns digging a hole for the dog. At first, I felt a bit like a voyeur, watching something that I shouldn't, but Janis had invited me to her home and to be a part of the happenings going on there. Soon Janis left the hole and returned from the dog pen carrying the lifeless body in her arms.

I watched Janis and her son place their beloved dog into the hole, covered the body, then wrap their arms around each other as they allowed one a last moment with the dog, and I again felt a pang of emotion.

I did not know the dog, but I felt sad for their loss, and even witnessing from a distance, I felt connected to the loss in a way I had not expected. When they silently looked over the burial site, I, too, paused in silence to honor the sacred moment. Even though they could not see me, I felt invited, included anyway.

Ellis and the She-Tree

On packing up to leave Janis' house, I decided to take a brisk walk around the neighborhood. Just down the street, I could not have missed this enormous wooden statue of some sort of goddess in these people's front yard. Walking on by in full power walk determination, something suddenly moved me to stop and ask.

Ellis opened the door with a cheerful, welcoming smile. “Hello!” he sang out enthusiastically. I explained my curiosity about the lovely wooden goddess-like creature, and he lit up with pride. “Ah!” he replied. “You want to know about the She-Tree. Well, she has a very special story.” He went on to explain that when the tree became diseased and was scheduled to be cut down, the wood carver John Sewell called just the day before to ask if he might put carving tools to the tree to see what spirit might dwell within. So, he carved out what he called “the spirit of the She-Tree”. Ellis showed me how to stand at the right angle so that the He-Tree behind her became visible in his embrace of She-Tree.

Ellis asked for my story, and I explained that I was travelling alone around the country. I found myself telling him how I had felt harried. That in all my thinking about logistics and schedules, I still hadn’t quite settled into the trip, into just being in the moment and enjoying the journey. He flashed me a gentle, understanding smile, and seized the teachable moment.

“My Dear,” he said, “All the busyness of your mind is there for a reason. It is difficult to appreciate or use the Zen moments if you do not have the occasional harried-ness in your life as its opposite. Observe the harried-ness. Know its function of getting your plans accomplished and seek its balance with still mindfulness. All is meant to be and all is well.”

Ellis invited me then to write a blessing on one of the smooth rocks he had placed at the base of She-Tree for just that purpose, as he handed me a permanent marker and stepped aside to give me space for silent contemplation. I paused, thinking about what Ellis had said, and wrote “movement” on one side and “stillness” on the other, in honor of the need for both modes of being in our humanness.

I placed the stone, and Ellis gave me a hearty hug. As I left, I realized that he was the exact teacher I needed in that time. Perhaps the nudge I felt to go to his door was my own intuition, my inner guide, telling me there was something important to learn here.

I continued my fast-paced walk, contemplating his teaching, and I wondered when my quiet moments would arrive. Even in long hours of driving alone, my mind felt harried in its fast-moving thoughts. But I would soon learn, with lots of practice, to quiet my mind and just be.

Billy

Aside from “official” people, Billy was the first person I met at Burning Man.

After miles and miles of dust and rock, dust and more dust, then the entry gate security staff, the cop who pulled me for going 8 miles per hour in a 5 mile per hour zone, and the greeters, I received my city map, and arrived in Black Rock City.

Amid the dust, decorated bikes, mutant vehicles, circus-like tents, and people upon people decked out in there evening finery, I located my camp, Burning Man Contradance, and the moment I pulled my little Kia into a vacant space in the cracky dust, *this* man passed me, smooth and sure in his connection to the earth as his bare feet gently padded by. Barefooted?! After so many horror stories of the dry, cracked condition of “Playa Foot” from exposure to such an alkaline, ash-like dust, I took notice of his assuredness as he glided on. The way he moved....was.... exquisite.

Captivated by the man, I wanted to say hello decided instead to get my tent and gear set up before dark or the next dust storm, whichever came first. Just as soon as I shuffled off in my busy-ness, harried-ness to get settled, I had a little pang of doubt, an odd sense that I had just missed an

important soul-connection. But stilled I buzzed about as I met some fellow campmates who acclimated me to the scene of the evening's dinner prep and suggested a tent location under the shade structure.

Set up with just enough time to change into a tutu on realization that it was, of course, Tutu Tuesday, I heard the call to dinner, located my plates, served myself a much-anticipated meal, and settled down at a table under the dining hall shade tent. As I sunk into the seat with a sigh, Billy plunked down across from me. We both paused long and quiet in our exchange of smiles, in praise for the meal and the moment.

After some polite allowance for eating time, we introduced ourselves to each other and others at the table. Billy was one of two Contra Dance Callers for the week. Within minutes, I learned that both Billy from Connecticut and Dave from Florida sitting next to me had connections to Unitarian Universalist congregations in their hometowns.

By the end of the week, I knew I would see Billy again. Something about the fragile transparency of his soul, through which he allowed the true nature of his emotions to shine, intrigued me to learn more.

I don't recall seeing Billy in shoes at camp. Nor did he have on shoes when I met him in his hometown weeks later in the parking lot outside the place we would ecstatically dance, nor the art galleries where he laughed among friends at art openings, nor to the two Unitarian Universalist churches he had me visit. He preferred to connect to earth in his walk.

In his hometown, Billy was well-loved. Everywhere I followed him, I was greeted by his many loved ones with group hugs, over and over again. When I told him about the conflict I had felt back in the desert, in my choice to unpack rather than meet him, he threw his head back and laughed in that joyous Billy way.

Billy is a tribal leader in his town, he was a teacher, and he was a guru-like guide for me. He reminded me of the old songs I used to sing while drumming and dancing around big fires, of my barefoot wanderings into woods, and of the special lifeway that used to nurture my soul. Without saying a word, he reminded me seek and bask in beauty as I find it. To laugh and cry for it, and to share it liberally with those who pause and pass. He reminded me to sing my heart songs vastly.

Wondering alone,
I dared to crack a window of my heart,
Tolerant of cockroaches and rats
For the wondrous creatures that crept and flew in.

Among them, the butterfly, most beautiful I have known,
The joys and sorrows of his life laid out in glorious pattern upon his wings.
Enticed, I followed him home,
He lived in a glass house,
And threw no stones.

Scamper

At the age of 69 and well under my own 5-foot, 1-inch stature, I marveled that Scamper made herself comfortable at Burning Man, where everything, even the most mundane of tasks, involved lots of effort, and I admired her tenacity in going after what she wanted.

Scamper and I decided one afternoon to ride the Flyer over to the HeeBeeGeeBees Healers' camp to attend a Monkey Chant. Shaking off the dust and settling comfortably onto cushions set out at camp, we soon began chanting. About halfway through the monkey chanting session, Scamper whispered that she was heading to a workshop at some other camp. She said she would leave the address on my bike.

Returning to the bike though, I became excited for the opportunity to taxi more people around. Scamper's workshop would go on for a while yet, so I figured I had some time to play. So I zig zag back and forth across the vast expanse of the desert location that is Burning Man, picking up and dropping off passengers.

Time to pick up Scamper, I headed to her address. Not sure of the name of the camp I was to find her, I searched a bit in that general vicinity before deciding that she had probably walked or found another ride back to our camp, and I, too, headed back.

But Scamper was not to be found in Contradance Camp, and it was getting dark. I expressed my worry thoughts to some campmates, who assured me that Scamper was capable of taking care of herself and that I should not worry about her.

Scamper finally arrived in the wee hours of the night, limping. She had tripped over a tent stake and was injured pretty badly. As we later found out, she had broken and dislocated a rib and bruised her shoulder. I was so worried about her, feeling terrible that my own irresponsibility might have indirectly caused the injury by having her to wander even more aimlessly than the typical burner might otherwise. She cupped my face into her hands and insisted that I look her in the eye.

"Everything is as it is meant to be", she said. "Do you hear me? Do not worry. I am my own woman, and you are not responsible for me. All is well". I've heard this before, I thought to myself and smiled, nodding my response to her that, yes, I hear you, and I believe you. Her body was injured, but her spirit was not. And she was able to be a wise teacher to me even in that time of physical pain.

Later, Scamper posted on facebook that it was "the best of times, worst of times." I agree. She told me that in 2013 she hiked 660 miles on Camino de Santiago trail. She said, "Folks asked what group I was with. 'None', I said. 'I'm just showing up!' 'Alone?' they gasped! She is now preparing for a 4-day 200 mile bike event in Lafayette, LA at the end of March. "Going alone and just showing up!" she says, and I am inspired.

The Passenger

Burning Man, with its Gift Economy idea and encouragement toward creative expression, had inspired me to bring the tandem bike to taxi people around on at the gathering. One afternoon while "cruising empty", I cruised up alongside a slow-walking, potentially-tired woman, enthusiastically honked and dinged the horn and bell, and asked, "Helloooo...? Did you call a cab?"

The return expressions progressed through a cycle: surprised, puzzled, thoughtful, relieved, and finally settling on delighted as she just as exuberantly replied, "Sure!", while settling into position on the back seat.

"Where ya headed?" I asked.

“7:15 and Carny”, she said, and we pedaled on, chatting lightly about nothing in particular.

As we disembarked at her camp, I asked if she’d like to sign the travel log I carried in my basket. Of course she did. Reading later, I found this:

“To an amazing soul who helped me in a very dark moment”, kisses, Lorna.

“...helped me in a very dark moment, she wrote. I had been unaware of a her sorrow, grief, pain, fear or other darkness she might have been struggling through, but my simple gift of a lift had lifted her spirits, seemingly.

Lest we carry around travel logs to document our casual encounters with other souls, we seldom have a way of knowing the effects of our connections with others. Firmly reminded of the everyday effect of my own personal pond of emotion, facial expression, choice of words, and tone of voice to had to another soul,

I was moved to choose love:
To find that place in another,
to openly connect,
to ask, to listen, to notice
to wish them well
and believe it.

Nora

Relieved to finally locate a hotel after somewhat of a search in Missoula, Mt, I started to unload some items to carry inside, when I noticed the vacancy light go out. “I guess I was lucky enough to get the last room,” I thought to myself. Moments later, a woman pulled a little sedan into a parking space next to me, and asked me if there were vacancies here. I told her I had just seen the vacancy light go off, and she went off to check at the front desk. I asked her to come back and let me know, so we could use my laptop and my room’s wi fi to look up other hotels for her.

Returning with no luck, we looked some things up, I with wi fi, and she consulting her road map. As we talked about hotel vacancies we chatted a bit, and I discovered that she, too, was traveling alone. Nora jotted down some phone numbers and addresses, but before heading off, I invited her to stay in my room if needed. She promised to come back if she wasn’t able to find lodging elsewhere. The woman pulled out but was back within about 15 minutes, and I was secretly happy to have a hotel-mate for the night.

Sure, I realize this was risky behavior, but housing Nora was a risk I was willing to take in order to get to know a kindred female lone traveler. She and I talked in our room about our experiences, what we had seen, who we had met, and suggestions for what not to miss. She had her stories of soul connections, too. She, too, had folks along the way wondering aloud to her if she wasn’t afraid for her safety. I shared with her an article I had just picked up about women who travel alone.

After a healthy exchange of friendly banter, we both fell asleep in our separate beds, and I was grateful for the new friend and grateful that she needed a room at just the right time I was able to

offer help. Nora and I are still in contact and still share learnings from our travels.

Closing

The trip was way too long, and it was way too short. It was, by no means, easy to travel alone. Most of my encounters were with strangers at the start. But my soul connected with all of these, and I was able to make some practical and playful applications of many of the positive traits of these souls to my own life experience.

And this is just the beginning of the story. I deeply appreciate the opportunity this congregation has granted in allowing for sabbatical leave, and I hope to share more of my sabbatical experiences with you~ the pilgrimage to our partner church in Transylvania, professional training courses, family time, and building design ideas~ as opportunities unfold.

At the end of the sabbatical I developed 5 personal goals for this year, all of which will ultimately inspire my service in this faith community, but I'd like to share one in particular: I want to increase spiritual my spiritual practice and mindfulness. Now, I realize this is not a very measurable goal, but I did also include some strategies for developing this life piece: I wrote in one of my many journals that I would journal every morning and evening, spend time in nature three times per week, and engage with a spiritual community outside of my professional realm at least once per week.

These are not going perfect, but they are progressing, and I'm ok with that for now, since we're only just wrapping up January, but if there's one thing sabbatical traveling taught me, it's that day is unique in its opportunity to learn something new or shift the mood of the soul just in our mere encounter with other souls. We pass them by the tens or hundreds a day, each a potential portal through which to receive some enlightenment, some new idea that changes our course.

May you and I all be ever on the lookout for these chances, these glimpses to something new.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Recall a time when you were surprised by a special connection you made with someone that affected you in a way you did not expect.
2. What changes can you make in your own soul to encourage deeper connections with others, even strangers?