

Living in the Layers

A sermon by the Rev. Jackie Clement

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One of the jobs in my checkered career history was as a cook in an Irish pub. There were times when our three-person kitchen was simply overrun with orders. Occasionally you would find yourself with far more orders stacked up than you had time, room or ability to produce and someone shouting more orders at you by the minute. We had an expression for just such a time common to most professional kitchens – it was “being in the woods.”

Being in the woods was a time of stress and, occasionally, just a little panic. But being in the woods was also a time of great excitement. It was a time to test what you were made of. It was a time to push yourself, to struggle, and ultimately and hopefully, to find your rhythm, to come out the other side having learned something about yourself and your abilities.

It’s a theme common in fairytales, as well. Hansel and Gretel, Rapunzel, Goldilocks, Little Red Riding Hood – all spent their time in the woods, wandering, lost perhaps, amazed by new sights and encounters, tested and frequently scared, but ultimately triumphant, sometimes with a little help from their friends, sometimes by their own wits. The woods are a metaphor for that time of transition, which at times comes to us as dark and perhaps a bit frightening, a time when we must find our way. And we each have such times in our lives.

Sara Moores Campbell writes that “wilderness is a part of every person’s soul journey, and part of our journey together as human beings who seek to live in community. Time in the wilderness is always a time of struggle. It is also a time of transformation and renewal... The journey into the wilderness reminds us that we are alone and not alone. We are neither where we have been nor where we are going. There is danger and possibility, risk and promise.”

Northern Europeans, such as the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault, depicted this transition time as entering the dark forests of their experience, but other authors have depicted it differently. In the experience of those who dwelt in the Middle East centuries ago, this time of testing and growth was drawn as wandering in the desert wilderness. The Israelites fleeing Egypt went through it, wandering 40 years. Their faith was tested and they murmured against their leaders. At times they despaired, and in doing so lost their faith and their way.

Jesus went through it, too. In the first book of the Gospel According to Mark, Jesus is baptized by John with the Spirit descending on him like a dove. “And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” How quickly things can turn. You are

my beloved, now get out. In the wilderness he was tested for 40 days, in struggle and transformation, in danger and possibility.

But woods or wilderness, the landscape of metaphor is of little import. The feelings are the same, as are the opportunities. It is a time of uncertainty. It may be a time of high anxiety, even fear. It may be a time thrust upon us by circumstance or as Henry David Thoreau wrote it may be a choice to “live deliberately.” Whatever the circumstances it is always a time of exploration.

Campbell further writes that “a journey into the wilderness represents a time when we both pursue and resist the holy.” I love that line. We both pursue and resist the holy. We are there for a reason, we hope to emerge whole, perhaps more whole than when we entered the wilderness. We hope to expand our knowledge of ourselves and of what it is we find holy. Yet we resist, too, for the woods or the wilderness can be a scary place populated by witches and scorpions and all manner of things better left alone, like our own deepest feelings. Frequently, we just want to get out of there. Yet, despite our apprehension, we cannot resist pursuing the holy, for to be alone in the wilderness can grow intolerable. And so we seek beauty and comfort and we seek each other.

And the journey is not devoid of beauty and comfort. Along with the witches, the woods also hold the delight of gingerbread houses and bowls of porridge that are just right should we have that combination of stamina and good luck to find them, and the presence of mind to notice them for what they are. There can be moments of respite and joy. And there can be someone there to hold your hand. Even Jesus while he was tempted by the devil was simultaneously waited on by angels.

Wandering in the wilderness might be a somewhat overly dramatic depiction of the ministerial transition that this congregation is about to enter into, yet there are points of similarity. This congregation is undertaking a time of transition, a time to be spent intentionally seeking your way, “living deliberately.” It is a time to consider both who you are and where you wish to go as a church, as a community of seekers.

Those who were here ten years ago may remember that period of transition as difficult. Rosie came as Minister of Religious Education, a ministry of 23 years ended, three interim ministers in three years filled the pulpit and brought their own talents to this ministry and then I showed up. Beginning in 2006 there were six ministers in five years. That’s a lot of change. And even if you weren’t here to feel the growing pains you may have heard about them from someone who was. But the two points I would raise are these:

1. The period of transition was not wholly difficult. Sometimes the pain of change sticks in our memories more than the fun parts, but there were fun parts. The interim years had lots of joy associated with them. It was a creative period of hope for what was to come. Remember that part, too. So that’s my first point that the period of transition was not wholly difficult and my second point is this:

2. The period of transition was not wholly different from any other time. The 23 years of David's ministry before the interim period held plenty of change and the last eight years have seen quite a lot of change, as well.

In eight years, we've had a number of staff transitions – Rosie, Samantha, Mable and Phyllis left. Nancy, Terina, Walter, Katie, Charlie and Ryan joined us. We've lost old friends, and made new ones. We increased the physical footprint of the building significantly while reducing our carbon footprint. We remodeled our worship space and audio visual changes allowed us to offer worship in new ways. The Board has begun looking at a change in our governance model. Old traditions have fallen away and new ones have been born. All is change. But we've had a pretty good run these past eight years. Change may not always be comfortable, but it is necessary if we are to thrive.

My colleague, Megan Foley, says that “Churches need deliberate chaos and mess from time to time...for out of the mess comes creation.” You might feel called to smooth the waters in the coming months, to make the way easy, without any troublesome waves. But before you do, consider whether a little jostling around might allow something to burst to the surface that has been too long submerged. As we heard in the reading from Peter Boullata, these are tough times for churches, times that require reimagining who we are and how to be a church. The creativity that allows new answers to emerge, might just be waiting for a time such as this.

So do not let this time of ministerial interim be only about keeping on keeping on. Indeed the interim period should be a very intentional one. It should be a time for living in the layers. In the poem I read earlier, the poet looks back across his life in order to consider the way forward. Though the past hasn't always been easy, he uses the disruptions of yesterday as stepping stones to the future. “Every stone on the road precious to me,” he says. He urges us to live in the layers of time, not to simply stay in the superficial and fleeting debris. The layers of time are more complex, but richer, too.

In choosing to move through the next few years intentionally you embrace the complexity, the possibility and the promise that comes with the struggle. This is an opportunity for reflection, study, learning, renewal and preparation for the future.

It is not a time to sit on a rock and wait to be rescued or wait to see what wanders along the path next or to wrap your arms around the first tree and refuse to take another step forward. The thing about being in the woods is you gotta keep moving. Tempting as it might be to have a nice nap on a mossy hillock and just wait things out, it doesn't work that way. Surely next year will come whether we work at it or not. But another minister will not just show up at the door unbidden. Visitors may stumble upon UUBN on their own journeys through the woods, but they will never become new *members* if we just sit on our rock and say “hi” as they wander by. It takes work to keep things running, but it takes even more work to keep things moving forward – to improve what is already wonderful.

Never doubt that you start from that proposition – that this is a wonderful church, a religious home that embraces diversity and welcomes seekers *and* that knows we can always strive to be better. Let this be a time for imagining what doesn't already exist so that UUBN can live into that reality.

I agreed with a lot of what Peter Boullata wrote about the changing nature of church. This is not a time to simply refine what already is and hope that the many people who define themselves as non-religious will change their minds and join us. This is a time when we have to find ways to join *them*. But where I part company from Boullata is when he says we can't even imagine what that will look like.

Forty years before cellphones were invented, we certainly could imagine them. Dick Tracy had an iWatch in the 1930s. We imagine it long before it happens. Imagining it is how it starts to happen. Today people are imagining congregations as coffee shops and fitness centers, as job training centers for the under-employed and community dining establishments. There are no longer limits on congregations tethered to Sunday mornings and buildings full of pews. The vision is already out there. What will be the shared vision here? How will you be a part of it?

The other day, I went back to the ministerial search packet that was developed in 2009, before I was called to this church. I read through the sections on what the church was looking for in a minister and what the church's vision was for the coming ministry. They were, in a nutshell, to become more of what we already are – more members, more money, more building space, more community visibility and more social justice. Now, when what you are is already wonderful, wanting more of that makes complete sense. Who wouldn't want to be even more wonderful? It makes sense unless you are in a context where you are becoming obsolete. It makes sense unless you are a truly wonderful phone booth, to extend Boullata's metaphor. Improving phone booths in the 1990s would not have saved them from becoming obsolete; they had to be wholly re-imagined. Churches need to be re-imagined.

People's spiritual needs will never go away, but the way traditional churches serve those needs is less and less relevant. I would argue that Unitarian Universalist churches are uniquely equipped to become the future for the people who define themselves as spiritual but not religious, who want spiritual exploration without centuries old dogma, who want to seek together, not be handed a map to glory. If I have any regret in the past 8 years it is in this, more than anything, that I never called a halt to the day to day operations to say, "What is our next big, revolutionary and world changing ministry?" So I say it now. What is your next big, revolutionary, world changing ministry that is not about sitting in a pew or serving on a committee?

You will be asked over the next two years to be part of the process of calling a new minister, of renewing the vision of this church and being part of its future. Make that vision bold. Don't seek to become more of what you are but to become something so compelling and revolutionary that people will wonder why they ever needed phone booths.

You will also be asked to contribute financially and with your time to the health and future of this congregation. I urge you to remember that you will get nowhere if you simply wait to see what next year or a new minister brings before you commit. Don't be standing around waiting to see who has the flashlight, let your own light shine to illuminate the way. No, we can't just sit on our rock and wait.

Let us ponder well and deeply. Let us navigate by our principles and live according to the best that is within us. Let us live in the layers.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

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