

STANDING IN LINE
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wayne Arnason
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Appleton, Wisconsin
www.fvuuf.org

November 14-15, 2015

SERMON PART 1:

There's an old story I know about a Unitarian Universalist minister who found himself unexpectedly standing in a line. This minister had just died and much to his surprise he found himself standing in a long line waiting to get in to Heaven. Since he didn't believe in Heaven, he was glad to have some time standing in the line to get over his shock and amazement, but when that wore off, he started to get annoyed about the line. After all those years of serving the people of a church, he figured at least it should get him into the express line. Then an angel patrolling the line gestures to a guy standing way at the back and tells him he can come up to the express line. As he walks by, the minister asks him, "Hey Buddy, what did you do in life?" The man says, "I was a taxi driver in Noo Yok Siddy." The taxi driver steps up and the angel looks down his spread sheet and hands him a golden staff and a welcoming cornucopia of fruits, cheeses and wine and lets him in. Finally, the minister steps up and the angel takes his name, looks him up and hands him a wooden staff and some bread and water. The minister is very offended and asks the angel, "The guy in line in front of me is a New York cabbie all his life and he gets a golden staff and a cornucopia! I spend my entire life as a minister and get this! How do you figure that?"

The angel is unimpressed, "Up here we only judge on results", she says. "When people listened to your sermons, they sleep — when people get into his taxi, they pray!"

Well, I don't know much about any next life, but in this life—I know that everybody sometimes has to stand in line. It doesn't matter who you are or what you're doing or how important you think you are. You might have had to stand in line in the grocery store to check out, or in the movie theater to buy a ticket, and you know you have to stand in line with others in your Group number at the airport. These visible lines are a routine inconvenience, inviting our patience, but there are other kinds of lines we stand in which invite something different, which invite our spiritual self-discovery.

I have always been aware of the ancestral lines in which I stand, and that's true of most people of Icelandic descent. My earliest memories of having an identity, apart from that of being a loved child within my family, are about being proud to be Icelandic and Canadian and Unitarian. So a story from one of my personal lineages is something I have to share with you in this sermon on ancestors.

I learned early that one line of my mother's family is traced back to Ingolfur Arnarson, the original settler of Iceland in 974. That's Ingolfur's statue in Reykjavik. So that was cool! But I also learned that religious vocations are not a strong thread running through my lineages. Only

two in this thousand year line of Icelandic ancestors were clergyman. The ancestors who have truly made all the difference in my life were actually lay leaders my maternal great grandparents, Einar and Frida Johnson.

Einar Johnson was born in north central Iceland and came to Canada in 1883, settling on Hecla Island in the middle of Lake Winnipeg. There he met and married Frida who had come to Hecla Island in 1877 with her mother, Bergthora Bergthorsdottir, following the death of her father when she was four. So I am proud to carry the name “Bergthor” which some of you have noticed as one of my email addresses, a name which has been passed on through these recent generations of my mother’s family.

My imagination has a vivid picture of Einar and Frida sitting in the pews in the little white church on Hecla Island in Lake Winnipeg during Holy Week, 1891, listening to Rev. Magnus Skaptason preach a sermon about the love of God saving all souls. I cannot prove they were there, but Rev. Skaptason was their minister and the church in their village of Mikley was in the circuit of congregations where he preached what became known as his “breakaway sermon”. The universalism he espoused in that sermon split in two the Icelandic Lutheran synod in the Interlake District of Manitoba.

My great grandparents were married on October 6, 1893, and I imagine Magnus Skaptason performing the ceremony. By then, Rev. Skaptason was embroiled in theological controversy. The Mikley congregation on Hecla Island, along with four others, had withdrawn from the Lutheran Synod, and established an independent Icelandic Synod under his leadership. Initially, these churches did not know anything about any Universalist denomination, so when they did seek a larger affiliation, it came through the Unitarian Church in Winnipeg, which was also founded by Icelanders. In the beginning, however, they were simply finding their own way as they understood the Bible to be speaking to them.

Einar and Frida left Hecla Island in 1900 and settled at Lunder in western Manitoba. Einar owned a livery stable. Frida raised the children, was an informal nurse to the sick in this small town, and was a poet of some note. She had a friend- and some of you may remember the late Rev. Emil Gudmundson who was the District Executive in Prairie Star for many years. The friend was Emil’s grandmother and together they decided to found a new congregation, the Mary Hill Unitarian Church. Einar and Frida’s second son, my grandfather, Bergthor Emil Johnson, and his wife Kristin, raised their only daughter Lilja as a Unitarian. Bergthor and Kristin became active in Unitarian Church affairs after they were married in Winnipeg and remained so throughout their lives. Bergthor chaired the 50th Anniversary celebration of the Winnipeg church’s founding in 1941.

So that’s the Unitarian Universalist family lineage into which I was born and grew up. It’s a precious thing and a gift that only a minority in our congregations have been given. The rest of us do something that’s more difficult but equally precious in this church – we claim the lineage of this church as a realization, a discovery, a family we did not know we had.

I didn’t fully appreciate what it means to do that until later in life when I had my own opportunity to own another lineage, a Buddhist lineage. Just as my Icelandic Canadian identity

conflated early in my life with being Icelandic Unitarian, my Unitarian Universalist identity conflated with being a Zen Buddhist. It became clear to me that our individual experience makes sense only as we identify with an ever-larger river of human stories on which we are carried. What all my lineages seem to have in common is that in each one I have been proud to be part of a small, little known, little understood, but incredibly important group of people.

As I got more deeply involved in studying and practicing Zen Buddhism, I found I understood more deeply what people who are not born and bred UU's must do to claim the ancestors from whom they are descended spiritually, rather than through blood. One of the invitations that Unitarian Universalism extends to those who join a congregation like this one is to adopt as your own the family story of this faith. It takes some commitment to take the time to learn the whole story of how we got to be the unique religious community that we are today, apart from the little snippets you hear about it in sermons.

In the Zen Buddhist tradition, one of the most impressive parts of the liturgical week is the service when the assembled Sangha claims the lineage by chanting the names of all those in their line of teachers from Buddha's time to the present day. Every teacher's name from every generation over 2500 years is spoken, and for good measure a few mythical names are thrown in at the beginning before even Shakyamuni Buddha's name is chanted to acknowledge that Buddha realized a reality and a consciousness that already existed in human beings before he was born.

We don't have a liturgical equivalent to that in any ceremony we do in this Fellowship. But if we did, it would have two dimensions to it. It would have to include great names from our UU history that most of us might know – recent names like Jim Reeb who answered a call to walk across a bridge in Selma. Pioneering names like Olympia Brown and Augusta Jane Chapin whose leadership helped make ministries for women possible. Teachers' names like Sophia Lyon Fahs and Angus Maclean whose ideas about religious education made my religious education possible. Founder's names like Murray and Ballou and Channing and Emerson whose passion for the faith we embody today put their intellects, spirits, careers and bodies on the line. Not only that, if we were to have a practice of chanting our lineage, then it would have to have a second dimension as well -- the names known and honored in this particular community, ministers who have served in this community – Jacqueline Collins, Dottie Matthews, Roger Bertschausen. Can you imagine chanting Roger's name every week? But not only that! The lineage would also have to include the list of lay leaders held in blessed memory by many of you, the lineage of leaders who have made this congregation possible. For some of you, these are lines in which you stand that you are just coming to know and understand and claim. Kathleen and I are proud to join you standing in this line, and honoring this lineage, but remembering that we are all engaged in something bigger than any singular ministry or time in the life of this congregation.

As we age our way through more and more seasons of life and the changes they bring, I think most of us will get more and more intrigued by the life experience that those who came before us had – those we know well, like our parents, and those we only know as single memories or faded pictures or stories. I must acknowledge that sometimes this process of understanding the life experience of those who came before us is a necessary part of healing deep wounds that have been passed from generation to generation. In relatively healthy family

systems, however, the process of becoming more curious about your parents and ancestors lives happens as naturally as looking in a mirror and noticing that you are becoming them, at least physically.

We are told when we are young by older relatives that we have our mother's eyes or our father's smile, and that's fun. We lose track or lose interest of that as we go through the struggle to become our own person in adolescence and young adulthood. After that, however, the aging process takes over. I had longer hair and a beard until my fifties, and it helped mask the ways that I was becoming my Dad. Now when I look in the mirror I often see him and think of him. I started to think about where he was in his life, his marriage, his career, at the same age I was when I was in my forties and he was still alive and starting retirement and enjoying being a grandfather. I wish looking back I had asked him more questions about choices that he made and feelings that he had about how his life had gone, and yet I am not sure I knew which questions to ask about which choices, and whether I would have asked them in the right way.

READING: *Dandelion Greens* by Jane Flanders

You must come back, as your grandmother did,
with her basket and sharp knife, in daffodil light,
to the pasture, where the best greens spring
from heaps of dung, dark in the still brown
meadow grass. Cut them close to the root,
before they flower, rinse them in rain water
and bring them to the table, tossed
with oil, vinegar and salt, or homemade dressing.
They will be bitter but rich in iron -
your spring tonic, your antidote to sleep.
Eat them because they are good for you.
Eat them in joy, for the earth revives.
Eat them in remembrance of your grandmother,
who raised ten children on them. Think
of all the dandelions they picked for her,
the countless downy seeds their laughter spread.
This is the life we believe in -
the saw-toothed blades, the lavish, common flowers.

SERMON PART 2:

I don't eat dandelion greens to remember my ancestors, but whenever I eat the Icelandic foods that my dad grew up on, I remember him and my grandparents and feel grateful for the fact that I was blessed with parents that provided stable family lives and homes that are easy to remember fondly. There's a lot of people that don't have this gift in their lives. So for some a challenge and a choice that is made is to find other mentors and exemplars that can offer guidance in how to move through life's cycles and seasons. One of the tasks in searching for spiritual maturity has to do with where we find our life's teachers. I'm not necessarily talking

here about the formally assigned professional teachers that we meet in our school years, although professional teachers are often included in anyone's list of influential mentors and spiritual guides in the lives of their students. Beyond those assigned relationships, I am talking about the teachers that you seek out because they represent a lineage that you want to be part of, beyond your family lineage. The ancestors of your blood line, your parents, grandparents and those farther back, may have accessible stories that can tell you something of how to live a good life, but we also need guidance from those who teach about how to undertake a life's work. In some careers there are obvious teacher relationships involved in skills and trades and professions that are passed down from one generation to another. That lineage of teachers in my life includes the UU ministers I have admired and learned from, and of course the Zen Buddhist lineage of teachers where I study and stand.

Sometimes people seek out Unitarian Universalism because they have studied historic philosophers, theologians, writers or poets who identify with Unitarian Universalism and they become curious about what this kind of religion means in today's world.

Looking for the historic figures who represent teachers for you is a valuable spiritual discipline, and reading their biographies, to understand where they were in their life's journey at critical times can be illuminating. One of the striking things about reading the life stories of your own personal great teachers or reading their original writings is that we often find ourselves being touched by their insights into life's struggles in ways that melt away the differences between us that culture and time and technology can create. We are so caught up today in how swiftly our lives have been moving through periods of change, and we can easily identify the ways that the generations alive today have both unheard-of assets and advantages in the ease and longevity of our life spans than any other humans in history. But have our smart phones made us into human beings that are so different from those whose cycles and seasons of living were centuries before us? Maybe not.

The insights of the ancient philosophers of Greece, the artists of the Renaissance, and the early American founders of Unitarianism and Universalism still touch our hearts and open our minds in powerful ways today. The life issues they struggled with, the issues of love and loss, loyalty and betrayal, health and mortality, creativity and discernment have not changed all that much. We are human beings standing in a line of wisdom seekers and lovers of life, and we are at the head of that line, and the beneficiaries of all of their insights, and gifts, and courage. In the words of poet John Wheelock:

We live, we are elected now by time,
Few out of many not yet come to birth,
And many dead, to use the daylight now,
To stand up under the sun upon the earth.

May we do it well, in full awareness of the line that stands behind us and the line that stands before us. Amen.

© 2015 by Wayne Arnason. All rights reserved.