**“I’m a Stranger Here Myself”**

**A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Essex County**

**Pulpit Exchange Sunday, March 24, 2013**

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First of all, it’s a pleasure to be back with you once again this morning. It was three years ago, almost to the day, when your minister, Darrell Berger, and I last engaged in a pulpit exchange. Doesn’t seem that long ago… Anyway, I’m pleased to be back and pleased to say how much I appreciate my growing collegial relationship with Darrell and the developing association we have between our two congregations.

Darrell may or may not have mentioned to you that he and I have chosen a common title to preach on today. And so, while the content will differ I’m sure, both congregations are hearing, “I’m a Stranger Here Myself.”

So then for my part, what you may not know about me is that I’m a sucker for the narrative. I love stories – both hearing them and telling them. So I want to tell you a couple of stories this morning. We'll begin with a story that’s actually one of the short chapters from my book about the bike ride I took across the country a couple of years ago with a member of your congregation, Bill Slezak. I believe Bill and Rickey are returning from New Zealand later this week from a visit with their new granddaughter, Cecilia. But on to our first story…

We began our 16th day in Springer, New Mexico, setting out early because the weather was supposed to start out ugly and then get worse as the day wore on. We rode out along Maxwell Avenue, heading up toward the highway on the edge of town. Even at the beginning, we rode through a pea soup fog punctuated by driving rain. As we rode past the electronic marquee in front of the Farmer’s and Cattleman’s International Bank, it said that it was 42 degrees at 6:30 AM. “Oh, my God,” I mumbled a quiet prayer to myself.

The weather forecast did not let us down. Things got…well, they did not get any better. The challenges were many. It was cold and rainy. I was soaked to the bone and freezing. My eyeglasses were dripping wet, inside and out, and all fogged up, so that I had to take them off, which is not a particularly excellent thing for me to do. And to top it off, there was a strong headwind that put my progress into very slow motion. You might have had dreams like this; I have.

We three riders were all fairly miserable and so each of us kind of went at our own fastest pace, trying to get somewhere, anywhere, so we could get out of the weather. Towns are infrequent in northern New Mexico. Thirty-five miles up the road, what seemed to take an eternity, we arrived, one by one, at the almost *nonexistent* town of Gladstone. I got there about an hour and a half after Bill and about a half hour after Kriss (Wells). I really can’t exaggerate about how much slower I am in comparison to them. A lot! They were already well on their way to being warm and dry when I walked in to the Gladstone Mercantile Exchange, which was run by a kindly woman named Thelma.

When Bob Dylan wrote the line, ‘“Come in’ she said, ‘and I’ll give you shelter from the storm,’” I think he must have had Thelma at the Gladstone Mercantile in mind. She had plenty of hot coffee in a pot on the woodstove and we were welcome to it. She did not mind that we were walking around in our soggy, stocking feet, leaving wet footprints everywhere. She didn’t even mind that we had strewn our wet clothes all over her store, so they might dry. She exuded a, “do what you need to do and don’t worry about it,” attitude. So we did.

I was sore, and wet, and cold, and grouchy and hungry. After a few minutes, I walked over to where Thelma was hanging out and asked if I could get a couple of eggs over easy with some whole wheat toast.

“Sure,” she said. “But you should know that, even though we call it *whole wheat*, it really isn’t. Is that okay?”

I nodded.

“You want some jelly with that?”

“Do you have strawberry?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “But I do have some really good, homemade chokecherry jelly that I think you might like.”

“Yep,” I said, “sounds great.” My meal was perfectly fine and certainly hit the spot. A little later, when we’d finally thawed out and dried up as much as we were going to, and it was time to start riding again, I asked Thelma what I owed her for my meal.

“Well,” she said, “we don’t really serve breakfast here. But I could see that you needed it. Do you think $2.50 would be okay?”

We were warmed not only by the woodstove at Thelma’s Gladstone Mercantile Exchange, but also by the warmth of her gracious hospitality and generous care. I don’t know how many times we said, “Thank you.” It was quite a few.

I’ll finish that chapter for you in a bit. For now though, we’ll let it stand, as it is… The thing is… there I was – a stranger. And there Thelma was – a minister… to a bunch of soggy, middle-aged, vagabond travelers who were passing through…

Story number two – I also want to tell you about an experience I had many, many years earlier, an experience that helped to shape my own ministry from its very beginning.

I was a seminary student at the time out in the Midwest. Our Prairie Star District minister’s chapter was holding its annual spring retreat. It was to be my first. At each of these retreats, as in many chapters including our own Metro District UU Ministers’ Association, we have the rich tradition where one of the more seasoned colleagues takes an entire evening to share the story of their life odyssey with the other ministers of the chapter. It's an exquisite experience to sit in on.

The woman who had been selected that year (her name was Carolyn) was someone I admired greatly. She was bright, articulate and spiritually grounded. She was, to me, a central character in the life of our chapter. She was a leader, a force to be reckoned with, and someone whose gifts were easily appreciated. She was everything that I hoped I might one day be as a minister. I eagerly awaited that session so that I could hear the sharing of her journey. I wanted to know how she got there. I was sure it would be an amazing tale.

The appointed day and hour arrived. We gathered in a large room with our chairs circled around. Carolyn walked to the center of the circle and announced, “I have to apologize. I can’t present my odyssey to you. I have to make a confession – I feel so disconnected, even alien, to so many of you here. I feel so inferior, so much like an outsider, that I can’t even bring my story inside this circle. If it’s okay with all of you, I would rather spend the next couple of hours just talking with you – and not to you – about the state of our relationships.”

I was stunned. So was every other minister in that circle. Nothing like that had ever happened. I’m not sure I even breathed for a minute or two. How could that be? How could this seasoned, older, wiser and so capable a colleague feel that she was inadequate in any circle of her peers?

I think that was the first moment that I began to really understand my own call to the ministry. What I realized is that a universal part of the human experience is the feeling of being separated, the feeling of being other than/less than, the feeling of disconnection. Feeling like a stranger in a strange land wasn’t something that just I, or a few people that I knew, experienced. It was everybody, even those, maybe especially those, who seem to have so much going for them. "I'm a stranger here myself," is a feeling well known to us all.

I realized in that experience that the religious community was the place where one could turn to transform and transcend that experience of separation, of brokenness. I realized that the religious community is where we can aspire to be more than our individual selves; here we can aspire to be in communion with others, lifting the threshold of the human experience by holding one another in the transforming power of love.

I realized in that formative experience that I had been called to recognize and articulate a vision of that greater love, and then to do whatever I could to move toward that vision myself, and then to invite others to be a part of that vision as well – however separate or broken their lives might be; however successful or joy-filled their lives might be.

The truth is – the world, our world, really is filled with all kinds of brokenness. We don’t have to look far, at any given moment, to see that. If there were no such things as existential or spiritual crises, if there were no such thing as evil, there would be no need of religious community, nor of ministers – lay or ordained.

But there is need, and that’s because even as you are, I’m a stranger here myself; we all are. And because there is brokenness and separation, just as Thelma at the Mercantile Exchange was, each of us is called to a ministry of being with and for one another, holding one another, serving one another, in order to ease the pain and suffering that is a part of each human life.

A gift that comes with being a part of a beloved religious community, such as this… such as Unitarian Universalism, is a set of expectations that we all will always strive to be our best selves – that we will aspire to be in the continuous practice of tikkun olam, the making whole of a broken world.

We don't need to define what is holy for one another in order to work together towards what is good. The way the Father of Universalism, Hosea Ballew, used to say that was, "We need not think alike in order to love alike."

Loving alike is what calls us into community. It calls us as individuals to serve the larger good by serving others. It calls us as congregations to use our combined resources to make a substantial and beneficial difference in the way the world unfolds around us. As combined congregations – Orange and Montclair – we have great potential for seeking and serving the endless possibilities of goodness, and the possibilities for transformation and redemption of the separation and pain, too easily found in our communities around us.

Orange and the Valley have long been the site of the transitional flow of immigrants entering this country. Talk about separation! Talk about strangers in a strange land! Here we are, my friends.

We have the ability and the resources; we have the *call* to take action on our religious impulses, *as partners,* acting to make a difference, to make things better for those who are still learning to find their way in this strange new world, to make things better for those who've been here for a while – maybe even for generations – and who are still finding their way. We’re not talking about creating drudgery; we're talking about daring to imagine and generate joy.

There's already been one joint theater outing, for our congregations, to Luna Stage, which was very culturally educational for those of us who attended. There is the prospect of another such outing coming up on April 11th. I hope we’re able to do a lot more of these kinds of activities together. In them, the wider community is served because the theater is supported. The theater pumps the lifeblood of *imaginative thought* back into the community. It is redeeming for all of us.

There's been a lot of talk among folks in our congregations of joining together to work with one of the ESL programs that already functions right here in your facilities. I hope that comes to pass. It too would be redeeming for all of us. There are untold possibilities for doing things together that we haven't even begun to think of. There are untold possibilities of service and of redemption that await our common venture.

All of us come to our religious communities to gain guidance and support in finding and making meaning in our lives. What we discover when we get here are endless possibilities of service. That's a primary function of religious communities… providing opportunities for service. And it is through those possibilities of service that we encounter possibilities for redemption. It is in our service to others and to the larger good that our own narratives are served. It is here where our own lives might be redeemed.

It may well be through this sort of redemption, that we can grow more comfortable being a stranger here ourselves. Or maybe it is that we might even grow to find ourselves being a bit less strange than we thought we were when we first walked in the door. These are the possibilities for which we come and for which we work together in hope.

I promised earlier to finish the vignette from the bike ride that I started earlier. When last we left it, Bill, Kriss and I were just leaving Thelma's Mercantile Exchange:

When we got back outside, we looked up to the sky to see if there was any clearing in the weather. It looked just exactly as it had when we’d first stopped at Thelma’s – foggy, drizzling, windy and cold. The sky and the horizon were indistinguishable through the rain, and it was still so foggy you couldn’t see the fence posts along the side of the road. You could hear birds singing while roosting on the fence just a few feet away, but you couldn’t see them. It may not have been any colder, but it wasn’t any warmer either. Oh, well…

The thing was though, that now I was warm. I didn’t feel cold again that whole day. Talk about a breakfast that sticks to your ribs!

“I’ve always depended on the kindness of strangers,” said Blanche DuBois in “A Streetcar Named Desire.” She’s not alone in that regard. But I suppose that was Tennessee Williams’ point. She wasn’t alone. She depended on others. None of us are in this alone. We all depend on the kindness of strangers.

And in turn we have our moment in time of being the stranger, or when it’s time for us to be doing the giving. “All my life’s a circle,” Harry Chapin used to sing. I imagine that means we should take every opportunity, as Thelma did, to care for strangers ourselves. It’s all goin’ around and comin’ around. Today you’re at home and tomorrow… tomorrow you’re the one that’s on the road.

May you, may we all, travel well.