

**“A Fool’s Errand”
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Unity Church–Unitarian**

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CALL TO WORSHIP:

From the daily tasks and distractions that fill up our lives and crowd our hearts, we are called to honor and celebrate the wonder of being. We are called to deep springs of the spirit. We are called to peace, renewed commitment, and gratitude. Come, let us worship together.

STORY: Rabbi Eisik’s Journey, adapted from “Hidden Treasure,” a traditional East European story found in SOURCE

Long ago, in the city of Krakow in Poland, there lived old Rabbi Eisik in a wretched little tenement flat. Eisik lived in extreme poverty with his wife and children. Through all the hard times, Eisik had kept his faith and looked after his family and a poor little congregation as best he could.

And so it was that he believed, when he had a dream one night, that the dream contained a message from God. In the dream, he had a vision of a chest of gold, hidden beneath a particular bridge in the grounds of the royal palace in Prague.

At first, he hesitated to believe in what he had dreamed. But when the dream recurred a second time, and then a third time, he decided to make the journey to Prague.

But when he reached the bridge he had seen in his dreams, he found that it was guarded day and night by sentries, and he didn't dare to start digging. Nevertheless, he came to the bridge every morning, and walked around it all day until evening.

Eventually the chief guard, noticing the rabbi's odd behavior, asked him, in a very friendly way, whether he was searching for something there or perhaps waiting for someone.

Something prompted Rabbi Eisik to tell the friendly guard about the dream that had brought him all the way to Prague from Krakow. The guard laughed: "Oh dear," he said, "You poor old fellow with your worn-out shoes — you have tramped all this way for the sake of a dream! Well, it is a fool's errand that has brought you here, trusting in a dream. I can tell you that if dreams were to be trusted, then I'd be on the road as well, because I once had a dream that told me to walk to Krakow, and to search out a hovel in the poorest district, belonging to someone called Rabbi Eisik. There I was supposed to search under the hearth stone below the stove, where I would find hidden treasure. Just imagine! How was I supposed to find that treasure in a strange town, where there must be hundreds of Rabbi Eisiks!" And the guard laughed again.

Rabbi Eisik bowed graciously, and turned back home, to find the treasure hidden closer than he could ever have imagined.

READING: The Summer Day — Mary Oliver

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean —

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down —
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Sermon: "A Fool's Errand"

A few weeks ago a lively group was gathered for the Path to Membership class in the church I serve in Providence, Rhode Island. I am their interim minister, and being there has been my first introduction to the state.

We were taught in grade school geography that Rhode Island is the smallest of any state in the nation, dead last in size. Interestingly, I've never heard Rhode Islanders mention that fact. What they often do mention is that their state is the *most Roman Catholic* state in the country. They claim first in the nation status in at least this one category!

The first question that came up from these new members was: "How, with all the famous people who have been part of this faith, people like Jefferson, Emerson, Thoreau, John and Abigail Adams, Joseph Priestly, Clara Barton, Susan B. Anthony and Christopher Reeve... How come

people still don't know what we are about? Why do we *still* have to justify and explain that we are a church?"

The person posing the question mentioned her two Roman Catholic grandmothers who are unsure whether this Unitarian Universalist faith is a good thing to be part of. Others in the group, who had handled a similar situation, offered suggestions of how to introduce the church and our traditions to the grandmothers.

The young woman who raised the question listened, then said quietly, "It's a fool's errand." She paused and added, "But I owe it to my grandmothers to tell them why this church matters so much to me." When she said that, my thoughts went to another parishioner, from a prior church, who once told me she owed it to those she loved to share why she had become a Unitarian Universalist.

Christina had lived her life as a Roman Catholic, devoted to social justice and involved deeply in the life and rituals and community of the church. She was a devout, activist Catholic. When she realized that she was no longer a believer in her own tradition's teachings, that she was a Unitarian Universalist in heart and soul, Christina telephoned me at my church office to introduce herself.

That, of course, is not unusual. But for Christina, it came at a point when she knew she had little time left to live. She called me to ask if I would conduct her funeral. Christina could have said, "Oh, it doesn't really matter at this point - why make a change now?" Instead, with the courage of her convictions, she informed her family, friends, and priest. She explained her spiritual journey to them.

She told them she had discovered that the treasure of faith was not, for her, anymore to be sought in a place that was distant, and guarded, but that her faith was with her, within her, in the midst of her everyday life.

Like many people who discover our tradition, she had made her way home and found a treasure beneath her own hearthstone.

And so it was that I came to know Christina, and her family, in the final weeks of her life, and stood with them at her graveside. Christina had asked a friend to build her casket, and to inscribe on it the line from the poet Mary Oliver – *What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

Christina followed her religious journey with integrity, and embraced her life to the full, leaving her loved ones with a question to guide them in their journey of living.

What do we tell people when the opportunity comes to share our religious tradition? What do we tell our grandmothers, our families, our friends, our coworkers, our neighbors? This sermon is part of an answer to that question.

When you tell people you are part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, one of the first questions you are likely to get is about belief. “What is it your church believes?”

People who expect religion to provide answers are confounded by this creedless faith. Creedal traditions focus on beliefs in the sense of orthodox sets of answers to questions. Whole generations, nations, religions, have spent untold energy arguing about beliefs, defending against attack, arguing with each other, arguing with their own beliefs. So people ask us, and want to know, what is it you believe?

One important distinction among spiritual paths and faith traditions is the question of where wisdom begins. Most begin with a creed and teach adherents to align their lives with those beliefs. Our tradition, in contrast, begins with experience. We acknowledge that experience and

perspective differ among people. We begin with experience, and from it draw wisdom, guidance, and choices of how best we each might live our one wild and precious life.

We all have beliefs, great and small, which guide our lives and shape our choices. I sometimes say that ours is a church where you come not to be TOLD what to believe, but where you can discover what it is you truly affirm and believe.

Our spiritual tradition concentrates on the fruits of the spirit: encouraging and fostering faithfulness, reverence, trust, human worth, and community. We acknowledge our mortality, fallibility, contradictions, and imperfections.

We encourage one another in working to create a more just society and world. We value commitment, hope, compassion, and justice. And as someone put it, we love each other, “despite the evidence.”

In our congregations we do not gather around a billboard of beliefs. We gather around a covenant, a promise, around relationships and community. We pledge ourselves to the mission of our congregation, to the unfolding life of our church. Becoming part of a congregation means sharing a future with people who walk together as best they can, living as best they know how. It means sharing insights and loving concern with one another in mutual respect and discovery, honoring one another’s precious life.

Living our days in such a spirit is how we grow spiritually. How a soul, as the poet Margaret Drabble said, *weathers into identity*.

Weathering...a wonderful image.

Weathering comes from exposure, from change, from cycles of seasons; weathering comes from being out in the open air of life, in contact with the elements. Not sequestered away in splendid isolation. Living in the midst of the questions is one way the soul weathers into identity. The poet Wallace Stevens wrote: "We believe, without belief, beyond belief."

Faith is not about belief in something irrational or about a blind connection to something unreal. Many people assume that is the point of religion – to offer the rock of certainty, answers, beliefs. Those who become actively involved in living their faith usually find otherwise.

For example: One of my friends is an active member of a UU congregation. She told me she is a theist. She believes in God. Her mother, on the other hand, is a tithing member of the local Lutheran Church. Her mother, the devout Lutheran, is an atheist. She does not believe in God.

Belief, especially about what we cannot prove or disprove, is not necessarily what binds us to a faith community. Sometimes religious liberals seize on such contradictions. We should never seek to expose another person's beliefs or another religion's beliefs as objectively impossible, untrue, fallible, illogical, or at odds with what is being professed. This is not the point. It is hubris to belittle another person's beliefs. We have a spiritual quest of our own to attend to. And we have our own internal contradictions.

One point of departure for a spiritual quest is to look deep within yourself. Look until you are able to identify what you most highly prize, what you value. If you can truly claim what for you is holy, what is ultimately precious – not because you think it is the correct answer, or the easy answer, or the orthodox answer, or the Unitarian Universalist answer – but because it is what you are at once most grateful for and find most worthy of spending your life for, whether

you succeed or fail. Then you are weathering toward a faith that will sustain and shape your life.

This is a place, and a tradition, where we are encouraged in this quest.

So one way you can describe our tradition is that we begin with experience, with our own wandering observations, discoveries, supported by the rich human heritage that comes to us from earlier generations.

Another characteristic that describes us is that we are an embracing faith. We seek to be inclusive, instead of exclusive. Love guides us toward connection, covenant, respect for others. As Francis David said, centuries ago, "We need not think alike to love alike."

We are an embracing and inclusive faith when we honor and affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This is the first of the Principles shaped and adopted by members of our congregations. This is not a radical affirmation. It is found at the heart of much spiritual wisdom. It is a simple value. But putting this principle into practice in our day to day living transforms us, and weathers the soul.

The prophet from Nazareth taught very simple values long ago. Despite all the religious embroidery that has obscured the wisdom of Jesus, his message, too, was quite simple at its heart. Wake up! Attend to what really matters! Don't worry about the future! Love one another. Forgive each other. Treat one another with respect, despite differences.

And the prophet Micah had a simple message centuries before: "What does the Lord require of thee but to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with thy God?" These are simple enough injunctions to fit on your daily calendar. This rich heritage of faith encourages our journey.

One of the privileges of being a minister is to witness what a colleague of mine calls “the small miracles that happen in church every Sunday.”

I witnessed one on Christmas Day. A man named Arthur began attending the Rhode Island church I serve. At first, Arthur seemed to distrust all of us. When I put out my hand in greeting, he shied away. After several weeks he seemed ready to say hello. Arthur has a lot of voices talking to him all the time. He lives in one of the local shelters. On Christmas morning he was one of the small, hardy group of 45 who came church for the service.

Arthur stopped in the reception line afterward and told me he had slept through the offering, but he wanted to put something in the collection boxes. He held out his palm and in it was some change. I explained that the offering had been taken to the office already and, thinking I could save him the trouble of going all the way across the building, I suggested he put the coins in the offering canisters by the coffee.

But Arthur wanted to give something to the *church*, not to the coffee hour. He made his way across the large building to the church office. The volunteer treasurer was in the office, counting up the two generous Christmas Eve offerings. There were stacks and stacks of money, bills and checks, piled up on the table. And this is what I got to witness as I arrived to hang up my robe.

The treasurer looked at Arthur, who was holding out his hand with the coins, pointed to a spot in the middle of the piles of money, and said in a warm and friendly way, “Put it right here, my man.” Arthur carefully set down eight cents on the table. He smiled. The treasurer thanked him warmly. Arthur gave him a cheerful Merry Christmas! and went to get a cup of coffee.

Each of us has our mite to contribute, coins of the realm or a big bill of loving kindness and respect. We can offer one another forgiveness and respect. Each of us has some treasure we carry that we can offer to life. That is the journey of the spirit. That is the measure of community. That is the difference between a spoken affirmation and living our values in practice.

If you have an opportunity to tell people about what you have found here, and why it is important to you, you may want to keep in mind these two ways of describing us: that we begin with experience and that we are embracing and inclusive.

We need make no apology for living a faith that goes beyond belief, that begins with experience. We strive to invite and welcome those who find their way to our bridges, and not act like guards who won't let people close enough to dig deep and discover treasures they seek. We weather into our faith by setting out on the journey, not knowing what we might find.

We may set out for a distant treasure, only to discover it is here with us all the time. We have a chance to share this treasure, not to guard it or hoard it. Let's be generous with our precious lives, sharing our experiences and this embracing community. Some conversations may turn out to be a fool's errand, while others may be ways we share our tradition with a world in need of our message. What more precious gift could we give to those who have only dreamed of such a treasure?

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