

WELCOME HOME
Woodinville Unitarian Universalist Church
September 10, 2006

Thank you, everyone, for being here today and for all your sharing of your summer journeys. I'd like to take this pebble and put it in the jar as well and explain its significance. Actually, the pebble isn't that important but an incident on that trip was the genesis of today's theme.

I had been invited earlier this year to be chaplain at an Eliot summer conference in Naramata, British Columbia, which is in the eastern part of BC. Eliot, for those of you who don't know of it, is a series of usually weeklong conferences and times for Unitarian Universalist folk to get together and have insightful workshops and much community time.

I spent an enjoyable week there and then began my trip home down toward central Washington State. Now, I don't know about any of you but I always get nervous when I am approaching the border. Going into Canada seems easier. But coming back presents an emotional challenge. I approach the border customs station wondering about any past sins I don't know about or simply can't remember. And why would the US Government know or care about them anyway?

On this particular day there was a long line and I had plenty of time to contemplate all past transgressions including anti-war marches in the '60's. I finally got to the front of the line and the woman who was the customs agent looked carefully at my 1995 dusty Caravan mini-van with the "Honor Diversity" sign on the back. She asked the usual questions: "where were you in Canada?" "How long did you stay?" "Are you bringing any tobacco or alcohol into the US?" and so on. She then asked for my license and other identification. She went to the booth and checked some computer program, also asking where I was born. She finally came back to my car and gave me back my license. She thanked me and then said, "have a good trip and welcome home."

"Welcome home." I drove down the road deeply touched by that simple sentence. To this day I appreciated what she said but I really don't know why. True, part of it might be that it was anti-climatic to get through the inspection and come out the other side OK. And don't get me wrong – I enjoy going to Canada. But something about her words moved me and I think at least that part of it involves our understanding of 'home'.

What does "home" mean to us? And more precisely how does the feeling of "home" become meaningful to us when we come here to church?

Let's sit for a few minutes and reflect on what that word "home" conjures up for us in our minds. Does your mind immediately go to your current home? Do you come up with an image of "home" that might seem soothing or quiet? Does "home" mean a place or a group of people all enjoying each others' company and maybe having the occasional argument about who cleans the bathroom but otherwise getting along pretty well?

When I think of "home", several words come to mind. One is that Bob Ditzler, Megan, Kitty and Michelle Hopkins all mentioned last week in last Sunday's delightful service. "Housework" conjures up vacuuming, cleaning the bathroom and the kitchen, chores that are never, ever done. Here at church, we have an unending amount of housework to accomplish. Fortunately it's a good way to meet people and feel as though one is accomplishing a good task. Robert Galloway is chairing the Buildings and Grounds Committee and we all have an opportunity to help maintain and improve our shared property here.

Another involves our kitchen and the task of preparing refreshments on Sundays. The Hospitality Committee led last year by Marcia Wesley and Linda McCrystal did wonders but both Marcia and Linda have moved on to new work here. Marge Lindsey has taken on the coordinator role for hospitality but needs support. It's a good way to meet people and push buttons on kitchen appliances to our heart's delight.

Now, you might be thinking to yourself that you're beginning to be disappointed. "Where's the inspiration," you might be asking. And it's true – housework is not inspiring but there's a feeling of accomplishment and it's nicer especially for guests who show up.

That brings me to another word – "homework". It's an especially pungent word this time of year as school comes back into session or our jobs remind us that vacation and homework do not fit well together. When I hear the word "homework" I think of lessons to be memorized or reading for a job until late at night. Hardly inspiring most of the time, you might say. But church "homework" can be different. I have here the new Insight brochure where the classes for this fall are listed. We also have our new and ongoing Small Group Ministries that meet monthly at peoples' houses and talk about life, food, parenting, and the great questions of meaning that challenge us. Yes, "homework" does challenge us to think in new ways. For my part, I am determined to bring more depth and intellectual stimulation to topics this year. I do this in part because we must question the conviction that religious liberals have spirituality a mile wide and an inch deep. Critical thinking and inspirational intuition can go hand in hand.

This brings me back to my pebble and story and another word to share with you. That word is “homeland.” We cannot dismiss or ignore the 5th anniversary tomorrow of the tragedy of September 11, 2001. The very word “homeland” used as a term like “homeland security” is no doubt an innocent phrase but it brings up other words used in European countries that use words like “Fatherland” or “Motherland”. The inference is that the homeland must be protected from attack and danger from those enemies “out there” in the larger and dangerous world.

This year I hope we can talk about many topics to inspire and challenge us. I want to speak about Jesus as a human being and his radical subversive teachings. I’d like us to ponder how we face mortality with grace. I also want to talk about fear. Fear has been a close companion most of our lives. Most of us grew up with fear of nuclear war. Today we are bombarded with stories, facts, fiction, and even docudramas that can create endless sources of fear and anxiety. We hear of terrorists coming to get us, or immigrants taking the jobs we don’t want, or global warming or glaciers melting. We worry about our children getting just the right education starting in first grade to prepare them for a life of hard work and success. We worry about our aches and pains and fear death and old age. Few of these sources of fear are new, of course. What might be new for us is their sheer volume and proximity to us in daily life.

Home ought to be a place that replaces the anxiety and fear we carry to an awareness of our own power to transform fear into grace and compassion. Coming to this spiritual home should do the same. This is a part of open-minded and open-hearted community.

Down on Avondale Road I saw a sign at a very fundamentalist church on the right side. It said, “Jesus is coming. Be right or be left.” There’s fear stated in those words. For those who believe Jesus is coming, may they be blessed in their belief. For the rest of us, righteousness means helping the poor and the homeless on our grounds.

It means accepting that this whole world is our home and not just owned by one religion. It means that we face no rapture but that we do face the work of making the world a better home one person at a time.

We don’t promise rapture and we won’t tell you we’re right. What we will tell you is that we offer tools to help us live that our children may thrive.

We don’t promise heaven for the few but this home for the many who seek an alternative way.

Welcome home.