

***“On the Road to Find Out”***  
***First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto***  
***A sermon preached by Stephanie Gannon***  
***on 14 August 2016***

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

I want to start with a confession: I’m obsessed with the movie “Harold and Maude.” I can’t tell you how many times I’ve watched it. Some might think it’s just an obscure and wacky dark comedy no one’s ever heard of. When it came out in the early 1970’s it wasn’t a commercial or critical success. The famous Chicago film critic Roger Ebert gave the movie his lowest rating and completely trashed it. Apparently, it didn’t become a kind of cult classic until about a decade later.

I can’t quite explain it, but I find “Harold and Maude” somehow very spiritual since it has the basic arc of the quintessential spiritual journey. It’s a coming-of-age story about leaving home, falling in love, suffering loss, and experiencing an awakening of sorts. Also, it doesn’t hurt that the soundtrack is by Cat Stevens, whose music has such a melancholy and depth to it and makes some of the film’s images all the more memorable and poignant.

To give you a little plot summary, Harold and Maude meet at a funeral (not an obvious place for a first date!). Attending strangers’ funerals is a hobby they both share. Harold is in late adolescence and still lives at home with his mother. The Chasen family is very wealthy and lives in a mansion. Harold’s depressed, though, and keeps acting out by staging numerous fake suicide attempts to get his mother’s attention and to protest her meddling in his life. Despite his over-the-top behaviour she remains cold and oblivious to her son’s needs. The family home is like a tomb for Harold, and it’s no wonder he’s longing for something else.

When he first encounters petite 79-year-old Maude and sees her stealing a hearse(!) Harold’s riveted. She’s not afraid to do what she thinks is right, even if it means breaking the law. Maude is anti-authoritarian: for example, she steals a car in order to dig up a tree on a city block and replant it in the forest. She’s also creative, ebullient, and passionate, loves music and dance, and is very sensual. She’s the antithesis of his uptight, pretentious mother—a

lover of life and consummate free spirit—and Harold quickly falls in love. He can be himself and fully relax with her. They laugh and tell stories together over picnics as she shares with him her philosophy of life. She invites him over to her cozy home in an old caboose by the beach that's a kind of cave for the senses. On the night of her eightieth birthday party they celebrate together and she seduces him(!) for the first (and last) time.

While for Harold it may be the best night of his life thus far, it's one that ends in tragedy. Maude, who, it turns out, is a Holocaust survivor originally from Vienna, has taken an overdose of sleeping pills. This time it's a real suicide attempt, and she dies. Harold is completely devastated and grief-stricken. The final scene is of his driving his Jaguar off a cliff. Afterwards he stares out at the wreckage, and then starts playing the tune to "If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out," a song Maude taught him and they sang together, on her banjo.

Both Harold and Maude are unusual characters obsessed with death, but I would argue that the film's actually a celebration of life and life's journeys, which are fundamentally about growth and loss. Although Harold has lost the love of his life, the final image of him dancing on the hillside in the sunlight where they'd hung out before suggests that Maude's bright spirit lives on in him. He's been transformed by their brief time together and will go on living and growing without her. I keep thinking of one of the lines from the refrain of a Cat Stevens' song from the movie soundtrack, "On the Road to Find Out"--*"Yes, the answer lies within."* This is one of the few introspective and integrative moments in the film and happens to be just where the story ends.

On a different but somewhat related note, one of my favourite things to do as a small group facilitator is to have people draw their spiritual timeline or map. People can be as creative as they like—some will simply draw a straight line marking off major life events, while others will make a winding path or even a spiral. The more creative the better! I ask people to think about what psychoanalyst Abraham Maslow called "peak" experiences and other major milestones along their spiritual journeys that somehow transformed them and to indicate them on their maps. Then we gather back in the circle to tell our stories. We reflect on similarities and differences. People are usually struck more by all the things they have in common. It can be quite moving to learn about each other's stories.

I'm unable to distribute paper and pencils or crayons for us to do this exercise now, but imagine your life's journey up until this point. What shape

would it take? What were the most challenging parts? The most exciting? When did the divine or the Holy show up for you along the way, if at all? Another way of saying this is what were your most meaningful experiences? At what points did you find yourself growing the most? Where is First Unitarian located along this journey?

Take a moment to find the piece of ribbon you were given this morning as you came in. If you've lost it or didn't receive one, please ask the ushers to give you another piece. Now hold it in your hand as I reread today's reading, William Stafford's, "The Way It Is":

There's a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But **it** doesn't change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.  
While you hold it you can't get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
You don't ever let go of the thread.

What is this thread you're following? How does it ground you during times of change and uncertainty? Where is it leading you? What's surprising about the nature of your thread? It's alright if you have no clear answers to these questions. This is just intended to get you thinking. Depending on where you are along your life's journey, you may have a more or less clear perspective on what your thread's like.

Here in midsummer is a good time to reflect on your journey. What threads do you want to pick back up or let go of come fall? Maybe it's time to join a Journey Group like you've been wanting to or to become more involved in other groups or activities, or perhaps instead it's time to step back from certain commitments and refocus on your health or other concerns. What is calling out to you now?

In his wonderful little book, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, Father Richard Rohr describes the first half of life as more about safety, order, establishing boundaries, respecting and following authority and tradition, and doing and consuming, whereas the second half, which usually starts at around age 55, is dedicated more to developing spiritual maturity and pursuing personal growth and transformation and includes such things as necessary suffering, forgiveness, and an ultimate realism. This is where elders and wisdom teachers come in who know firsthand the fullness and inner

freedom characteristic of the second half of life. You have to go through the first half to reach the second. In the first half of our lives we're creating a container strong enough to hold answers to questions like: "Who am I?" "What makes me significant?" "How can I support myself?" and "Who will go with me?"<sup>1</sup>

Father Rohr traces a five-part hero/heroine's journey of mythology based on Joseph Campbell's work that roughly corresponds to Rohr's sense of the spiritual journey's being divided into two halves:

- The hero/heroine (often a prince or princess) lives in a world that they take as given and sufficient.
- They're called to leave home for an adventure of some sort. They take courage and get out of their current comfort zone.
- While on the journey, they find out their real problem and are almost always wounded in some way. The wound becomes a kind of secret key, taking on sacred qualities that transform them. Through this experience of epiphany, their world expands and so do they.
- The hero/heroine's first task, which they think will be their only one, is just a warm-up for their discovery of their Real Life, which is "an underlying flow beneath...everyday events" or what religious people mean by "finding their soul."<sup>2</sup>
- Finally, the hero/heroine returns to where they started from with a great gift for their people which they'll pass on. Their journey invariably involves an excess or abundance of life. They become concerned about the next generation and not just themselves.

How does this common plot of the hero/heroine's journey compare with your own? Do you see any similarities? I can see parallels to my own life and call to ministry with its various adventures and challenges.

On the necessity of radically breaking ties to one's home base, Rohr writes, "Perhaps it has never struck you how consistently the great religious teachers and founders leave home, go on pilgrimage to far-off places, do a major turnabout, choose downward mobility; and how often it is their parents, the established religion at that time, spiritual authorities, and often even civil authorities who fight against them."<sup>3</sup> The examples he cites include Buddha,

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011) 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 84.

Jesus, Sufi saints, Abraham, Moses, and Hindu sadhus. A common theme in all of these stories is that they ironically *need to leave home in order to find it*. Another commonality Rohr perceives is that their journeys all involved necessary suffering and a kind of dying. They had to lose their old lives or give up the false self before they could discover their true self. What is meant by “the true self” is your essence or, as the Zen masters say, “the face you had before you were born.”<sup>4</sup>

Father Rohr claims that “[l]ife is a matter of becoming fully and consciously who we are already are,”<sup>5</sup> but unfortunately we are mostly too much caught up in forgetting or never make it beyond the first half of life, which tends to be more about our title, role, or status. This is also a theme in my Hindu tradition, and it’s certainly true of Jesus’ disciples, who are always making mistakes and forgetting critical aspects of his teachings. Rohr claims that it’s religion’s job to teach and guide us to the (re)discovery of our True Self, but that mainstream religion usually gets too caught up in orthodoxy, empty rituals, or contests for worthiness.

Some of my yoga teachers insist that home is where the heart is and that our homecoming is to awaken to the divine that’s always within. We’re just too distracted or disconnected and need to be reminded of this—usually over and over again! As one of my meditation teachers, Sally Kempton, writes: “Keep looking for her, for him, for That—always knowing that what you are looking for is what you already are. As you sense that presence, let yourself be with it. Moreover, let yourself be it. Meditate on your own Self, the one who is always there for you, the one who contains you in its stillness, the one who is always meditating on you.”<sup>6</sup>

As I prepare to take leave of the congregation today and to continue on my journey elsewhere, what I wish for you is that you might keep finding the courage to venture forth from home so that you can return again wiser and ultimately more compassionate and forgiving. Keep hungering for greater spiritual depth and maturity as you strive to live into your fullest, most expansive, boldest loving selves. Believe in the possibility of transformation—your own and this community’s. Go on using your many gifts to serve others and to bring about more justice in this broken world of ours. May you always know that you have everything you need and are enough already. The open road awaits you.

---

<sup>4</sup> Cited by Rohr, 86.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

<sup>6</sup> Sally Kempton, *Meditation for the Love of It* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True: 2011) 299.

I am so grateful for our time together and all of the learning we've shared. My life has been transformed by you all.

As of tomorrow, we'll no longer be journeying together, but please know that my love is with you always.

Blessed Be and Amen.