

That's How I Got to Memphis
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North Universalist Chapel Society

When the Master points at the Moon, when the Master, through his teachings, invites people to experience awakening, the fool looks at the finger, the fool studies in books, studies words. All the finger does is to point at the Moon. The teachings of Buddha point at Awakening.

The Moon symbolizes wisdom and enlightenment. These words come to us this morning from the Kanshoji Zen Buddhist Monastery in France. It's an ancient teaching about not mistaking the signposts along the journey of life for the wisdom and the beauty of the journey itself. We do that sometimes. We mistake the signpost for the journey.

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, April 16th and the title of this morning's reflection is a borrowed title from Tom T. Hall—That's How I Got to Memphis, a song he first recorded in 1968.

Good morning and welcome to this gorgeous and new blue-grey day. Welcome, dreamers and seekers of spirit, who are both bold and bashful in the quest. Welcome, wanderers and worshipers, here so give their souls a rest. Welcome to the open and to the broken ones, blissfully imperfect, blessed and beloved, caring and compassionate beneath the stars above. Held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds. To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is so good to be together."

John's eyes were so clear and so blue. He looked stronger yesterday than when I saw him last week, sometime after his son John Jr. was in this sanctuary talking about how deeply her cares for his beloved father. I'm sending two cards around the room now and you can sign them, whether or not you know and love John Matthews. When you run out of room on the cards, just write your name and a note on the Order of Service. We can gather them up at the end. Maybe we can make more of a practice of this moving forward. So, let's hold him in loving embrace, shall we? Let's send our light over to him throughout the course of this morning.

I believe in the power of prayer. Are you with me? I believe in the power of honest prayer.

Are you with me? We used to ask that question of the other drummers during the performance. It's a West African tradition, a Ghanaian tradition, an Ewe tradition to do so...right in the middle of the music. We would cry out, "Kinewe? Kinewe?" which roughly translates to "Are you with me? Are you there?" and to which the answer was always affirmative: "Ya!"

"Kinewe?"

"Yah!"

"Kinewe??"

"Yah!!! Yah!!!!" We had to rehearse the enthusiasm, although it had never been never insincere. We had to rehearse...because we live in a culture that is so withheld, so disembodied. We've honed a wonderful tradition, a gorgeous tradition,

a tradition to which I have dedicated my life...a tradition of covering our bodies with robes from head to toe. Faces and hands are the only things that can be naked, generally...unless we are at camp where almost anything can happen. And we tend to preach from behind the heavy pulpit. In Middle English, deriving from the Latin *pulpitum*, meaning 'scaffold, platform.' In middle high German, it traces back to *pult* which translates as desk. We put good distance between the congregation and the minister.

Don't get me wrong. I love it. I love the austerity. I love the pomp. I love singing the moldy-oldy, old school hymns in our tradition, parading in dolled up in the sacred vestments and the stoles and the shawls in the Jewish tradition (a fringed garment called a tallit). I love all of stuff. I often wish we had fancy hats. I should talk to Pru Schuler about that. She carries the wisdom around these parts about fancy hats.

Some are put off by such things...because they hide weaknesses sometimes...because they substitute sometimes for the special feeling that we do our best to kindle and to nurture here. We've honed an austere tradition, a gorgeous tradition, a life-worthy tradition of sacred vestments because ministry is a habitation. Do you know what I mean by that? Ministry is a co-habitation, more accurately. So, a habitation is "the state or process of living in a particular place." In the context of ministry, a habitation is the special house or the sacred home of the soul and its growth and development. The vestments are the subtle symbol of this house, this home, this sanctuary is the hardened garment that we get to wear. Reverend John Cummings would raise the question regularly. It was like clockwork. He'd ask, "How do we clothe in truth and beauty the moments that make up our lives?" What "garment" can we wear that brings out the best in us, that shows off our figure? Every body size. Every body shape. Everybody's body. What "garment" would land our picture on the cover of a fashion magazine? What is the nature of the "garment" that would bring us fame?

I'm not that into fashion. It's not the thing that makes me happy. But I love watching other people love it. I mean, I don't buy the magazines. I didn't ever study fashion but I really admire those who did. I really love how passionate certain people get who are in-the-know—do you know what I mean?—about belts and matching hand bags, about color schemes and design innovations, about trends and vogue and breakthroughs and throwbacks and classics that are always style.

I very often allow my wisdom mind to wander and get lost in the world of fashion...mostly by watching *The Devil Wears Prada*, one of my absolute favorite movies of all time. I don't know what that says about me...that I never grew up to be a Scarface-loving guy...even though I so love Al Pacino.

So, in this movie, *The Devil Wears Prada*, beautiful scenes take place—scenes that broaden my perspective, scenes that deepen my discernment. It gets intense. Art does that for us. It broadens our perspectives and it deepens our discernment and it gets pretty intense along the way. It gets pretty particular. It gets specialized, this snooty, high fashion world. I suppose I love it for the same reason I love ministry. I love the pomp and all the pretense...and the way it cuts right to the chase in the inner circle. The artists are so highly valued.

At one point in the film, Nigel—one of the inner-circle, high-fashion people—Nigel reflected on the world design. With highest respect, he said, “Halston, Lagerfeld, de la Renta... And what they did... What they created was greater than art...” Roy Halston Frowick, the 70’s designer who hailed from a country called the Midwest. He was born in Des Moines in 1932. And Óscar Arístides Renta Fiallo, better known as Oscar de la Renta, Dominican American by heritage. He was one of the couturiers [koo·too·ree·ayz] who worked with Jacqueline Kennedy. And Karl Lagerfeld, the German designer, who was the director of Chanel. Nigel said, “What they created was greater than art...because you live your life in it.”

Obviously, high fashion is an art the we can live in. Literally, it’s the clothing that we wear...but what about John Cummings and his permeating question? “How do we clothe in truth and beauty the moments that make up our lives?” By far, these are the more beautiful garments, aren’t they? And Halston, Lagerfeld, de la Renta would all agree. Having created an art that we can live in—which is, in a sense, the finger that is pointing at the moon—what is the art that we will choose to make of our lives?

The spiritual journey does not simply ask us to don the vestments. It asks us to don the vestments to remember that which is beautiful and that which is sacred. The spiritual journey asks us to climb into a purity of thought, a practice of living, a soul-deep discipline of embracing life at its finest. Familiarly by now, Henry David Thoreau went to the woods. He sat in deep reflection and then, he wrote...

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, [I wanted] to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.

Henry David wasn’t donning vestments. He was stripping them away. And this is what we must do. Strip them away so that new leaf can unfold and enjoy the day. Having first assumed within our lives their purposes (the purity of thought, the practice of living, the disciplines of the soul that strengthen the wings of angels), we strip them away to rediscover that which is more beautiful underneath. Tender. Holy. Loving. Fierce. Gentle. Average. Miraculous.

I can be a terribly competitive man. Vain and shallow. Fortunately, I know I’m not alone. There are others with me, others who I very deeply respect. But I’m really competitive. I was talking to friends of spirit yesterday, I will not tell you who, but heard a story about a great preacher who could deliver his good message in six-minutes flat. Immediately, I said to myself, “I can do better than that.” And then, I started trying to figure out how to do it. I can’t do it yet but when I can, there’s gonna be a showdown! A fastest sermon showdown on The Green! Winner take all. A clash of the clergy. A battle of the bands but for local ministers and rabbis and pastors and priests.

Of course, I’m kidding but I really am competitive. So much so that I went searching for some wisdom on the subject and I found wisdom in the words of Alan Watts. He was talking about a Japanese concept called *yugyen* or

purposelessness—the experience of wandering in a great forest with no thought of return, carrying a stick that you find along the way and occasionally poking at old stumps? Watts says that, “All music is purposeless.” He asks, “Is music getting somewhere?” Then, he says,

If the aim of a symphony were to get to the final bar, the best conductor would be the one who got there fastest. When you dance, do you aim to arrive at a particular place on the floor? Is that the idea of dancing? The aim of dancing is to dance.

It was gratifying to rediscover this quote. I felt like it was a good enough message, good enough to offer in church on a Sunday morning. Then, I wondered if I could do it in six minutes.

I can't do it. I'm not wise enough or settled enough inside to do that yet. I hope to be. Maybe one day. Maybe one day, I'll get to the moon...instead of just pointing at it. Right now, I can barely make it to Memphis.

What is it about artists? Is there an unwritten rule, a law or some kind of code that says that when we get famous, it comes to be that we are referred to by a single name? It's true for high fashion—Halston and Lagerfeld and de la Renta—but it's also true in high art—Monet, Picasso, Rembrandt, Caravaggio, Cezanne, Modigliani...but there are always exceptions like Georgia O'Keefe, Jacob Lawrence, Andy Warhol sometimes and sometimes Vincent van Gogh. It's tameless. There's no consensus. It's illogical.

It's the same in high art music—this unwritten this law, this code. Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, Wagner, Schoenberg. Less rigid in American popular. So, you get Sonny and Cher in the 1970s. Bono and Sting, Madonna and Prince more recently. Bruce Springsteen is known as Bruce Springsteen but also as Bruce and also as Springsteen whereas Stevie Wonder is known as Stevie Wonder and that doesn't change. Elvis Costello is Elvis Costello because Elvis Presley is already Elvis. Neither goes by their last names...which is good because Costello and Presley sounds like a law firm.

All of these artists reached for something beyond themselves. Each of them tried to touch the magic. Each of them tried to kiss the sky...and all of them did and so can we. Stevie Wonder wrote a song called If It's Magic. He asks, quite simply,

If it's magic, then why can't it be everlasting
Like the sun that always shines
Like the poets in this rhyme
Like the galaxies in time
And if it's pleasing, then why can't it be never leaving

Why don't we have that power? He asks,
If it's special, then with it, why aren't we as careful
As making sure we dress in style

This is the question I would love to ask of Halston, Lagerfeld, de la Renta. Wonder asks,

If it's special, then with it, why aren't we as careful

As making sure we dress in style
Posing pictures with a smile
Keeping danger from a child
If it's magic, why can't we make it everlasting
Like the lifetime of the sun
It will leave no heart undone
For there's enough for everyone

Why don't we have this skill...the skill to make life everlasting? Why don't we have that power? Or do we?

There's a scene in an Aaron Sorkin screenplay in which Charlie Skinner, an elder journalist, is bragging about his family. He says.

My grandson Bo, Katie's oldest, has a garage band. Ask me what instrument he plays. [Actually, don't ask. He plays] All of them. Seriously, he's a savant. You put an instrument in his hands, give him a day, and he can play it. So, I was at their house last weekend and I wander out to the garage and see Bo teaching "That's How I Got to Memphis" to his friends. And I ask him, "What's a kid from New Rochelle [outside of New York City] doing singing about Memphis?" He said, "Memphis is a stand-in for wherever you are right now. ["That's how I got to Memphis"] really means 'that's how I got here.'

It's a catchy, little tune that packs a punch. That's quite a question. How did we get to Woodstock? What is the path that leads us to here and to now?

Do you know what we're doing here? ...why we gather and sing and are quiet...and are present with one another? I can't presume to tell you why you're here but I can share my reasons. That's the part of "we" that I own. So, when I ask "Do you know what we are doing here?" Part of that "we" is me.

I am here to let my feelings show. I am here to take the risk. Risk is vulnerability and intimacy in the presence of community. I am here to be vulnerable and intimate and together with you—face to face and with my whole self, unhidden...undefended. I'm up here in Vermont because I thought I'd find her here. I came all the way to Woodstock just for the chance to see her again.

If you love somebody enough
You'll follow wherever they go
That's how I got to Memphis...
If you love somebody enough
You'll go where your heart wants to go
That's how I got to Memphis...

I go to church... I am a Unitarian Universalist because I am a prisoner of hope. In the words of Gloria Steinem, "hope is a form of planning." Hope is the road I travel. Hope how I get to Memphis.

Last Sunday morning, Easter Sunday morning, days after being expelled from the State House in Tennessee, Justin Pearson spoke out in Memphis, at the Church of the River. The Church of the River is less than two miles away for the Lorraine Motel, the place where Martin Luther King was shot and killed in April of 1968. Pearson said

This has been a holy week. This has been a sacred week. The lesson from it is that resurrection is a promised prophecy to a persecuted people. Fifty-five years ago this week, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed by gun violence. And I tell you what: His words from what he spoke just days before he was assassinated are still true. The movement lives or dies in Memphis.

The Church of the River is also known as First Unitarian Church.

We gather up our hope and we send it out into the world...and it makes a difference. It surely does. How can it be otherwise? I think that hope is a form or gratitude. And so, I'd like to close with this. It is a poem and a prayer by Janis Ian. It's called ThankYous.

Papa gave me music and my mama gave me soul
Brother gave me reaching out to hold
Teachers gave me license and learning set me free
My schooling gave me nothing and music showed me how to live
Papa gave me wannabe, Brother gave me empathy
Mama gave me woman but that isn't all I need

As I have lived in houses and I have lived in homes
Eaten off of tables made of wood or stone
Through the trials and tribulations, I've never known
How to say I love you and let my feelings show

Thank you for the music and thank you for the songs
Bless you for the freedom in knowing right from wrong
I thank you for the laughter, the heartache and the tears
It's a blessing to grow and it's a goodness to be here

Thank you for loving me and letting it show
It's a pleasure to be here, so bless us, every one

We gather up our hope and send it out into the world. We send it out like bravest fire...for this hope in us is life everlasting.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

I hope that you wander in the woods today, with no practical thought of returning—a stick in your hand, poking at stumps, engaging in life everlasting. Let me have those cards and programs and I'll bring them on over to John.