

STARTING OVER

A Service by Fritz Hudson
Presented September 4, 2005

Opening Music: "Rondo" by Couperin - Christina Emra Buchholz, harpsichord

Chalice Lighting:

Welcome to our Church on this Founders Day, the 135th anniversary of our first meeting as a congregation in this city.

In this spirit I invite you to join mein our chalice lighting words today, the statement we have shaped and adopted to express our shared mission:

We, the Unitarian Universalists of Lincoln, Nebraska

provide a religious community to nurture spiritual, intellectual, and emotional growth.

We celebrate the individual worth of all human beings and life in all its diversity.

*We promote caring and responsibility for each other and our children,
the larger community, and the environment.*

We work for social justice, peace, and a more humane world.

(Church Mission Statement)

Opening Song: "I've Got a New Name Over in Zion"

Ceremony: Installation of Religious Education Leaders

Music: "Theme & Variation" by Rameau

Sermon

Zion didn't start out as the name of a place; it was simply a description; it meant "hillcrest," most likely. (*Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* Vol.4,p.959). When King David built his palace and temple on one of them in Jerusalem, however, more than 3000 years ago, that hillcrest -- that Zion -- became the symbolic center of the Jewish nation. Years later, when the palace and temple had been destroyed by conquerors and David's descendents had been scattered into exile, Zion became the symbolic place of a much-yearned-for reunion with God, a heavenly Jerusalem. The Zionist movement in present day Israel draws on this symbolism to make the resettlement of all David's historic kingdom a holy mission. And this same spiritual association led to the naming, as our nation's inheritors of that scriptural tradition moved west, of Zion, Illinois, and Zionsville Indiana and Zion National Park in Utah. I grew up not far from Zion, Illinois. Our countrymen didn't even need a hill to import to a place that legendary sense of holiness, I can tell you. And with that importation, we could bring with it the fantasy that somehow we could transform not only it but also ourselves once there – that by giving it this old name we could find an entirely new one for ourselves there. I understand the fantasy, but I'm wary of it. To be useful to us, I think it needs some translation.

When I returned to this pulpit two weeks ago I was drawn to think with you about what it might mean to "stay put" here. Actually this wasn't the pulpit I returned to at all. It was that one over

there, the one designed for this space when this building became our congregation's home 44 years ago. That one is here almost every Sunday except this first Sunday of September, our Founders Day. This pulpit here today was the one designed for the church that Rev. Chapin and his wife led our congregation to build on its original property, at 12th and H streets downtown – our second home on that spot. It was the altar of our Zion temple there, if you will, for 69 years. In this building, its usual home is at the front of our children's worship space. But we restore it to our center for just this Sunday every year. It gives us a visual vehicle for reconnecting with our forebears' legacy and to recommit ourselves to their mission as we now embody it.

Two weeks ago we opened singing "we are not our own, earth formed us – and "we are not alone, earth names us;" My thoughts then were mostly for how staying put, in nature, roots us in its full power. That song, however, also had us sing of ourselves as "fruit of many generations – (who) show us who we are." How to tap their power is what fills my mind today. To repeat myself - now thinking of our roots in prior generations as much as in nature – "'Staying Put' is not at all the same thing as 'standing still.' Staying Put entails continuous movement, both external and internal, but in its largest horizontal dimension it is circular, it revolves around and always returns to touch a home base. And its vertical dimension is like a spiral - like an augur digging ever more deeply, creating a channel through which we may root ourselves ever closer to the core of life itself."

Restless Nation, James Jasper's book, got my thoughts going on this plane. His whole point there is to expose and critique our national propensity to find meaning in movement to new places. Its full title though is *Restless Nation: Starting Over in America*. And as I considered that subtitle, I began to wonder if Jaspers saw its irony. Isn't the problem that he's pointing to precisely that we Americans know little of how to start over anywhere? What we know how to do is to start out – to move away from things - or to start in, to invade places. What we don't know how to do well, yet, is to recognize that no matter where we put ourselves, someone else has been there before us. More and more obviously, as humanity's time on this continent grows, no matter what we attempt to build with our lives, our efforts almost always try to find their place over what someone else has built on this place before us. And while we may perhaps, at least a few times in our lives, be actually able to make some kind of new start, its best chance of really forming a new future can only come if we come to terms with, and work with, what underlies our personal investment.

As individuals, only a little reflection makes my point. Do we ever really "start anew," in the sense of choosing who we are from scratch? Not hardly. Our self-consciousness as a choosing power comes when? - in our third, fourth, or fifth year? Our actual command of the skills of self-sufficiency comes much later than that. By the time we have both the will and the means to choose who we are, our genetic endowment has already shaped our choices in many ways. No amount of starting over was ever going to make me a professional basketball player. Beyond that, by that same time, our families and our experience has already shaped many behavioral habits whose power we only become aware of with difficulty.

Here's a simple example. Place your hands together before you, and then interlace your fingers to make a ball. Look to see which of your thumbs is on top, your left or your right. Now unlace your fingers and re-lace them so that the other thumb ends up on top. Does it feel just as comfortable that way? Do you suppose you do it both ways equally easily? Or would you have to expend some real concentration to start over, to change that habit? It would for me, I know. I suspect many of us have had the experience of consciously trying to "start over" in at least one area of our behavior – in eating, or smoking, or exercise. How much more of who we are lies in habits that never arise to our consciousness?

If so much of our individual identity already underlies, shapes and limits any power we might have to re-start some part of our life, I suspect that even more of our group or cultural identity is anchored in habits even more difficult to discern, and demanding even more power to alter. As an individual, what's made it possible for me to start over with my diet for example, has been first cultivating a studied awareness of what my behavior is, and then doggedly concentrating on getting the change I want to grow out of my established behaviors. Changing what I grabbed for snacks, for example, grew only out of becoming aware of and making decisions about the ingredients of what I bought in the grocery store. My "new name" didn't wait for me somewhere, over in some Zion; it grew out of who I am right here, once I dug deep enough to see and shape it. Now I'm wondering if our future together in ministry might call us to engage in some similar self-examination and conscious redirection as a church.

Within our church's story I can find at least two times when you might say we managed to take on a "new name", while staying put, right here. The first came with the arrival of Rev. and Mrs. Chapin in 1883. In the prior ten years, when our little church had stood without holding regular services, its congregation had divided itself into two groups. They even called themselves the "Ins" and the "Outs". At the first congregational meeting the Chapins attended, they saw the depth of this division when one member had to be physically restrained from rushing another. Those who had brought the Chapins here, the "Ins," then let them know that their calling was to get the "outs" out. But their knowledge of what underlay their calling moved them in the opposite direction. The root of universalism, they knew, was what we now name "acceptance of all persons and the encouragement of all to spiritual growth" Their teaching and practicing of this deeper legacy gradually brought our church to move past its ingrained divisions and to build the temple which housed this pulpit.

The second time our church seemed truly able to start over came some forty-five years later, in 1929. Ten years before then, our minister Arthur Weatherly had been forced to leave this pulpit by leaders who felt his ardent pacifism during World War I had created more controversy than the congregation could stand. Those ten years were filled with two short ministries which left little to our legacy. In 1929, however, with this pulpit once again vacant, the congregation found the strength to call Arthur Weatherly to return to invest his second decade in broadening and deepening our church's mark on our community and state. Somehow at that time we found the deeper, if difficult, power of the root of our Unitarian legacy which affirms the right of conscience within the process of democracy.

These "new naming" episodes of our history resurface in my memory now, because I am returning after a kind of break in our ministry, albeit one of only five months. And I am mindful that our association's wisdom following ministerial sabbatical leaves is that both church and minister may well find at their return to one another that their time apart brings with it evidence that either of both may have changed in their expectations or desires for renewed ministry. The first months of that return, this wisdom counsels, are best spent in a conscious mutual questioning, an open-handed shared exploration of the terms upon which both church and minister wish to reinvest in their partnership – a quest of re-covenanting, it's been called. Seven years ago, on the Sunday morning before I was installed as your minister, I wrestled out loud with what our "ministerial mold" might be here and whether I was called "to fill the mold – or to break it". Re-reading my words then this past week, I find they ended with my wondering "Does the mold expect that our minister will change while she is here, does he grow as well as guide. And should I? And can I?" My internal eye now suspects that I have changed, some, and want to change more. So now I wonder does our mold expect that our congregation will change, that our congregation will grow as well – and should we, and can we?

Christina, as always when she plays, brings a musical metaphor for what I'm wondering. Is our mold in the form of a Rondo, like her opening piece, which returns repeatedly to the same principal theme in the same key. Or is it rather a "theme and variations" – returning to its roots to nourish ever richer, adventurous explorations. The first step to answering that question, both musically and ecclesiastically, I suspect, would be to become more fully aware of those roots, to see and know both their reliable foundation and their capacity for evolution.

It is my good fortune that the parents of our elementary grade children this year have already moved us in this direction. At their request, the myths and legends which will ignite discussion in both our 1st through 3rd and 4th/5th grades this fall will be those best known from our the Jewish and Christian heritage. Even now they are looking back at the first myths of Genesis, at the emergence, out of chaos, of humanity, of Adam and Eve, to become choosers between good and evil. Are these images helpful or unhelpful archetypes in our pursuit of a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning?" They are already ahead of me on some of the path I'd hope we will follow.

One of those ministers who served in the period between Arthur Weatherly's two 10+ year terms, was Edwin Palmer. Almost the only thing our church history remembers him for is for one Sunday, at this pulpit, when he zealously tore pages from a Bible to demonstrate what it means to read scripture in reason's light. Apparently some here then thought he overmade his point. Perhaps they did not hear its other side, which he made 25 years later in a meditation manual our association published. He wrote, "The age of a man is more than his years. His senses, his emotions, his body and mind processes, are the distillation of the experiences of the millions of centuries --- To understand the limitations of his being is his first step in transcending them. To recognize the incompleteness and futility of his solitariness, and to accept his part in the wholeness of life, is to tap the Deep Sources." (*Deep Sources and the Great Becoming*. 1950

p.2.) To help us find our "new name", in this our Zion, I will over several Sundays this fall, hope to help us recall and reexamine our Deep Sources.

Next Sunday, when we begin, both our elementary children and we will find our taking off point in the myth of Noah, God's mythic partner in humanity's first covenant. Our more recent collective memory, of the tragedy on that date four years ago, in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania, will also give us pause next Sunday as well, move us to reflect on how well we've grown in our response to that national memory. But of course we are even now, in the midst of a new tragedy, a tragedy of water as was Noah's. Yet our response to this tragedy is showing evidence of our response to the terror of four years ago. Growth in that response is still demanded of us.

Many of us are just now finding our connection to this tragedy. Today we are asked for money in response; tomorrow we may well be called on for shelter, food, hospitality. Let us ready ourselves. Perhaps we even will be called by this tragedy to our own "starting over" right here even as are those on our Gulf Coast. My own search for myself in this tragedy, led the past Friday to the web site of our community congregation U.U. in New Orleans where I found this message:

What we know: CCUU is mostly likely flooded with water, probably up to the eaves, judging from --- aerial photos we have seen. Most of our members and friends have evacuated to safety, we hope. Communications are difficult, we have heard from some folks who have access to email. Phone service is unreliable.

"what we don't know." Just about everything. We awake each morning, if we are blessed, and the day is truly a blank page. Due to homes and jobs and routines we used to at least have an outline in mind for what we would write that day in the book of life, but now nothing is routine or normal any more. -- For those of us who don't know where we will live, or how we will earn our money, or when we can even see what shape our homes and businesses are in, we need time to just absorb our brave new world and get our bearings."

Perhaps they, and we, can begin to find our bearings in Gerard Manley Hopkins's words:

*Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs --
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

Closing Song: "O Life that Maketh All Things New"

Chalice Extinguishing

*To affirm life is to accept growth, (it is) to accent challenge,
(it is) to move with all one's full-orbed intent in response to the deepest the stirs within.
Then the miracle takes place. (Then) the deepest thing (that stirs) in (our humanness)
somehow makes contact with the deepest thing in life (itself).*

Howard Thurman