

“The Sacred Landscapes of Our Lives”

September 30, 2018

The First Parish in Lincoln

Rev. Jenny M. Rankin

On a hot July day in 1838

In a small chapel on the top floor of Divinity Hall in Cambridge

Emerson spoke words to the small graduating class

That have struck terror into ministers’ hearts ever since.

He called the prevailing religion of the day corpse cold

And said that preaching had become, well, just dull.

“In how many churches, by how many prophets,

Tell me, is manmade sensible

That he is an infinite Soul;

That he is drinking forever the soul of God?”¹

“Drinking forever the soul of God” -- put that on a job description!

He spoke of one particular preacher at the church in Concord

Whose preaching was so bad

Emerson said it was better to watch the weather outside the church windows—

To look into “the beautiful meteor of the snow”²

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” 1838.

² Ibid.

Than listen to the preacher.

“The snow storm was real

The preacher merely spectral.”³

You could not tell from listening to him whether “he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined.”

Emerson--all of 35 years himself and just exiting the preaching profession—

To become a writer and lecturer--

Went on to say,

“The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life—
life passed through the fire of thought.”

On that hot July day, Emerson threw down the gauntlet.

His “Divinity School Address” is still read and studied by Unitarian Universalist ministers.

And his challenge—

That our preaching be embodied, full hearted, soul-awakening—

Lingers with us still.

But just how to do that—not so easy!

How to deal out to people your life

“Life passed through the fire of thought”

In our present culture of memoir and tell-all,

Where personal details are avidly consumed

³ Ibid.

How easy for sermons to degenerate into the self-involved and narcissistic.

That said, here at the beginning of our time together

It seemed a good idea to tell you a little more about myself.

I'm in some ways reserved by nature; I like to get to know people a bit at a time

But we have two years and you've chosen to do *intentional* interim work,

Not business as usual,

But the important and not always easy work

Of reflecting honestly on yourselves and your life together here the past few years.

If we're going to do this, it's important that we come to trust one another.

Maybe if I share a bit of my story, it will help with that.

On the outside

The contours are fairly easy to trace--

Born in Boston

Lived in a (rented) basement apartment on Louisburg Square till I was 7

I can still remember candles in the window on Christmas Eve

Handbell ringers

We move to Milton

But still drove in most Sundays to go to church at King's Chapel

That neighborhood of Boston is still part of me—

Cobblestoned streets and secret gardens hidden away, the Public Garden and swan boats, the purple of leaded glass windows on Beacon Street.

I remember the way the great organ pealed out the hymns on Sunday,

The choir in the upper loft,

The fragrance of the stone church, beeswax candles, flowers,

The grey flagstone aisles

With candlelight flickering on rainy days

The kindness of the ministers

And the people who greeted me at coffee hour back at 64 Beacon Street.

The outside contours of a life are easy to trace--

I suppose--

Public schools in Milton

Princeton

Harvard Divinity School

Ordination and marriage in the same year

The birth of Emily and Charlotte

Our move to Concord when I was called as a minister

Travelling to Russia to bring home our son, Nicholas.

Busy happy years of working full time and raising children.

The inner part? Less easy to trace.

The death of my birth mother a few days after I was born would have to be in there

Something about birth and death coming so close together in my life affected me--
Ministry is partly about that, it seems.

My father's remarriage, the mother who raised me—that would be there

It was a long and happy marriage and I loved my mother

But I grew up in a family that was still grieving

My birth mother's name was not spoken when I was growing up and there were no
photographs of her. Grief was something that lived in our house but went
unspoken.

There would need to be a reckoning with grief and it would come to me in my life.

I went Princeton on a scholarship, worked in the dining halls, in an office. Not a
lot of time for sports or extracurriculars but I was on the school newspaper.

I encountered a world of people who had gone to private schools and travelled in
Europe. Intimidated at first, I learned that I could hold my own academically.

I spent hours in the library and loved it. Loved the professors, the lectures, the
intellectual sparks flying, and the long conversations about the big existential
questions over dinner with my friends and classmates.

I made friends and worked hard.

After college, I went to Paris on a fluke, invited by a friend.

My French so rusty I could barely buy a metro ticket--

It paled next to the polished accents of Princeton classmates who had studied
abroad but I got by. Found a job in a French law firm where no one spoke English.

I was broke and often lonely that year in Paris

But it changed me

I'd left church as a rebellious teenager proclaiming myself an atheist

But I sought solace in the great stone cathedrals of Europe
Finding there,
In the play of light and shadow over ancient stone
The organ music
The flickering candlelight
Something that seemed to speak to my soul
I travelled that year and grew to love Europe in a deep way that stays with me.

After Paris, I worked, then went to law school for a year
I'd been ambivalent about that choice but my friends were all headed to grad school,
Many to law school.
I felt uncertain, adrift, and I hated not knowing.

I'd been idealistic as a teenager
Had volunteered
Wanted to help, change the world
But now I realized I didn't have much clue about a vocation.
I'd always been sunny, outgoing, engaged with life and other people
Now I grew uncertain, withdrew into myself
After one year of law school I returned home, depressed.
I was unanchored, at sea, tossing and turning.

I've learned since then that this is how a new beginning can start--

In a period of pain or darkness, when the way seems lost and we feel blind

That is precisely when something new is stirring to life.

But back then I didn't know that—I just knew I felt anxious

Had been brought low.

In a world where I'd always gotten by with hard work, good study habits, straight
As, a big smile and friendly disposition--

It felt like my life had come to pieces around me

“The billows had gone over me” in the words of the ancient Psalmist.

After a time of disorientation,

Little by little.

I began to find my way back

I volunteered with the Quakers in Cambridge

Did community organizing and peace work, took a job in an office

I returned to church, started therapy, made new friends.

Slowly, I began to find my feet

In those broken summer days after law school

When weekends stretched wide and empty

I'd gone back to church, really just for something to do.

It turns out that I found there a community of people

People who were searching, as I was,

Some of them struggling, as I was.

I found there people who talked to me at coffee hour,

Who were kind to me when we went away on retreats?

Who invited me to help in small things,

Who made me feel like somehow I belonged.

I found in the preaching and prayers a language that wasn't about job titles or outward success

It wasn't about glossy surfaces, resumes, how your body looked or what club you belonged to. It was about something more,

Something that seemed to go deeper

It was a language about loneliness, desire, hope and despair. It was about healing, second chances, starting over. It was about a world where sorrow wasn't banished but was part of things, interwoven and connected with joy.

At church, I began to get a glimpse of a life not stripped of pain, but somehow integrating it, a life that had richness and resonance.

There was singing and psalms, poetry and prayer.

There was silence.

There were words that broke open my heart and helped me to cry.

Words that started to sow seeds of hope inside me, an interior landscape that had felt barren for so long.

I returned to church one summer weekend because I was bored and aimless and lonely,

And to my surprise, it turned out to be a place where—over time--

I began to feel more and more at home.

My spirituality was inchoate, confused, often wordless --
Lots of doubt, millions of questions, plenty of struggle
But little by little, through church, retreats, reading, prayer
The Quaker language of finding “that of God” in every person and every thing
I began to find my way—
Or at least knew I had embarked on a quest that would last a lifetime.

My journey led me in time to divinity school
I chose Harvard because of its focus on world religions.
It wasn't primarily a training ground for Christian ministers
But had a wider and more eclectic student body—business people, journalists,
teachers
At Princeton I'd learned how to research, analyze, critique.
At Harvard Divinity School, I began to find my own voice.
I didn't know when I entered HDS that I would become a minister
But, as the Quakers say, the Way was opening.
I didn't know precisely where it was leading me but I followed the path that
seemed to unfurl at my feet
Step by step
I did field work in a battered women's shelter, in college chaplaincy at Tufts, at a
parish in Weston.
Little by little, I grew into ministry.
It sounds a bit bald to say I felt called by God into this work but it's true.

It was a vocation that found me. That surprised me. That I had never dreamt of before.

It felt right

That was the beginning of my vocation

It has changed over the years, been tested and tried,

And I hope deepened.

I've encountered the realities of ministry

The frustrations, the politics, sometimes the compassion fatigue

I know that mistakes can be made and sometimes I'm the one making them.

I know that churches are like all human institutions

We sometimes hurt one another, get it wrong, say things we regret.

But I've also seen mending, healing, and things change for the better.

I don't have time to tell you much more this morning

My inner life has ebbed and flowed over the years--

There have been times of barrenness and times of growth.

In the last few years it has been challenged, shaken truly

By the serious medical of someone close to me,

Someone I love.

Life has once again brought me to my knees, and so,

I have returned to the liberal Christian roots of my childhood

And am grateful to have them.

And so, another new chapter of my spiritual journey begins--

I've been drawn more deeply to the contemplative tradition—

To practices of silence, prayer, meditation.

Vulnerability has broken me open, once again, and I am more ready to seek

More ready to receive.

Our souls grow as they grow--

Each one unique, different.

We are given different paths to walk in this life--

Different people to love--

Different lives to live.

I have tried to share with you a glimpse of my “inner life”

The interior sacred landscape of my life

And I look forward to being able to sit down with you and hear about your's.

What matters, among other things, I suppose is that we stop once in a while

To notice

To reflect

To listen

To move our fingers gently over the map

To try and trace the contours

The inner landscape and the outer

Of the lives we have lived to this point

Pausing

Honoring

Remembering

Giving thanks

And then we step forward again

To greet each day as it comes

As awake as we can be

As present to the hours as they unfold

And to the days as they unfurl before us

Bringing us what gifts—mysteries—sadnesses—joys that they will bring.

I'd like to close with these words by a Presbyterian minister who has spent most of his life writing novels, the Rev. Frederick Buechner. He writes:

“Listen to your life. . . . See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”

Thank you for helping me listen to my life.

I look forward to helping you listen to yours.

Copyright@2018Jenny Rankin