

“Checking to See If We’re On the Right Path: The High Holy Days, Sabbaths, and Sabbaticals”

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.,
by the Rev. Ken Sawyer
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A ministerial colleague of mine moved back to the Boston area this summer to serve our church in Milton. Reporting on her progress in settling in, she observed that,

“My favorite way to get to know a new place is to get lost. There’s something a little exciting about finding my way, discovering the back roads, coming upon tucked-away neighborhoods. I feel like I’ve mastered the surroundings when I pass a place from a new direction and – ah ha! – I have a clear sense of where I am. It’s a real achievement, especially in New England.

“A phenomenon that seems quite unique in this area is that there are street signs alerting us to the names of all the small streets we pass as we travel on the main thoroughfare, but precious few that tell us, should we become lost, what street it is we are currently traveling. We have to wait for a major intersection to try to find the landmarks that might tell us where we are (and only sometimes are they street signs). This wasn’t entirely new to us on our return to New England, but as I drove around happily lost one day, it seemed an apt metaphor.

“How often it is that we can see clearly the small paths we might take or could have taken, but can’t identify the big life journey we’re actually on? Sometimes we get the thrill of a surprising new discovery along the way – one that tells us more than we ever could have known if we had been sure of the way all along. Only at the major intersections do we get a chance to identify the path we’ve been on, and consider for a moment if it’s leading us in the direction we wish to go. And if we’re really lost, we can make a course correction and speed our way home. Whether home is the house where we live or a place of comfort and peace in our soul or both, it’s important to have places that mark our journey and lead us back to our deepest selves. Even if they’re no longer where we left them.

“Whether your travels led you across the globe or to your own backyard this summer, welcome back to this church home, and to the new page in our life as a congregation that begins this fall. I look forward to getting to know you all much better, and I hope this can also be a time for you to know one another anew. As we re-gather, let us see each other and ourselves again, as if for the first time. As we look around at one another, may we get glimpses of the meaning of our direction – as individuals and as a congregation – so that we may find our way home.” [Parisa Parsa]

Which is a very nice back-to-church-again message, and I’m happy to share it. But I want to go back to that image of the street signs, how we can often see what’s going on in a block-to-block way, how the minutia seems reliable enough, though for all we know, we’re off in some awfully wrong direction – knowing at every intersection what side street we just passed, perhaps imagining that therefore we aren’t really lost, though really, maybe we are.

That’s an image that has special resonance with me this year and this season, because it speaks to the Jewish High Holy Days, to the Sabbath tradition, to sabbaticals

(one of which I had this past spring), and to other times for stepping back long enough from the blur of passing road signs for this side street and that and wonder, am I even on the right street? And how's my driving, anyway?

The Jewish High Holy Days, the Days of Awe, the days between the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur, invite this sort of self-evaluation, a stepping back from the daily routine to consider if one's life doesn't need to be reconsidered, if one's failings are not in need of atonement, in order that in the year ahead, one might more often be able to say, in Sheenagh Pugh's words, "sometimes we do as we meant to." In the Christian tradition, St. Paul and St. Augustine both agonized at their human proclivity to do that which they knew they ought not, and championed the need to be reborn as someone made new by heavenly grace. Jewish tradition has believed that renewal can come annually by personal effort, by self-assessment, repentance, apology, and forgiveness.

But there is nothing as automatic about that forgiveness as is sometimes depicted in descriptions of the Catholic confessional. Maybe Jewish repentance and forgiveness is sometimes just as rote, and surely Catholic repentance is often sincere. But at the heart of the Jewish ritual, done deeply, is a consideration not just of one's derelictions but of larger direction of one's life. Is this the road I want to be traveling, and in this way that I am?

Much more immediately relevant to most of us here, the Sabbath provides such a regular chance to set our lives within a wider, broader, deeper perspective. Yes, the lecture you gave on Tuesday was bomb, or a huge success, as was the way you interacted with your child on Wednesday (or, if you are that child, the way you interacted with a parent), not to mention how worrisome is next Thursday's presentation or the test results due Friday.

I'm not suggesting for a moment that any one off these events may not be cataclysmic in your life. I do say, here is where we come with hope that anything we're facing just now will be more clear as huge or not, and in the midst of those who will care about us in either case.

Stepping back, internally. Doing an assessment of one's life journey, as at the Jewish High Holy Days. Positioning one's life in the larger scheme of things, as one may hope to do weekly on Sunday, which in the Western tradition has become the substitute Sabbath for most. (I confess that I am descended from many very prominent members of the Seventh Day Baptist Church, which is now even smaller and more obscure than Unitarian Universalism, but which in its own day insisted on Sabbath observance, which is to say, on very few activities on Saturdays. I like to imagine that among those few activities were self-reflection and re-dedication.)

Sabbaticals are sort of like that. Like academics, ministers get them now and then. Erin has one coming next year. I had one not long ago. I appreciate your generosity in giving me this chance, and do believe it's a good thing for me and for you to do, though for myself, I'm glad to be back.

Still, like Sabbaths and High Holy Days, a sabbatical gives me a chance to step back and consider the larger issues of what in the world we think we're doing. To help me ponder this, I visit other UU Sunday services.

Actually, though, a lot of what I notice there are the side street signs, the details, the particular ways a congregation does things. For instance, if you're new here today,

sitting unobtrusively in the back, maybe just checking things out, you may be startled when during the final hymn, all those people in front of you turn around to face you. Don't worry, it's not some scary way we greet newcomers, it's just something we do, singing the last verse of the final hymn turned toward the rear of the room, from which I then give the benediction.

How newcomers are greeted turns out to be one of those practices that can vary widely, church to church. We UU ministers have a chatline, and recently this became one of the threads of conversation: the question of having newcomers stand during the service and introduce themselves, so they can be recognized and greeted, which several ministers have said is their custom and one that newcomers really appreciate. Other ministers have differed, along the lines of, are you out of your mind?

Like many things about church life, what's going to be welcomed by one person, who is happy to tell strangers not just his or her name but a little something about how he or she happened to be visiting that church that morning, is going to be horrifying to someone else, like me, for example, if I were asked to do so.

And since I get to design most of the services around here, newcomers among you are in no danger of being asked to stand. But I do hope you'll come through the line and shake my hand at the rear of the room at the end of the service. And stay for coffee downstairs after that.

Which brings me to my annual appeal to those of us who aren't brand new here to keep an eye out for the person or couple or family you haven't met yet who is standing alone, and go over and strike up a conversation. We have a great committee that provides greetings and information to newcomers. But I liked the suggestion I recently heard made that we all think of ourselves as part of an extended Newcomers Welcoming Committee.

A final side street sign before I step back to make sure the whole drive is in the right direction. One way of getting to know other people here at First Parish, and of contributing to the wellbeing of the congregation, and hopefully of having some fun, is to get involved in one of our committees. Another is to attend one of the study groups or retreats. The latter you can find out about in the church newsletter or online. And as to finding a gratifying committee assignment, you can talk with our official matchmaker, Maureen Tillett.

Or, if you want to join our newest committee – in fact, if you hurry, you could be the first member – the committee that will make sure we continue to have wonderful staff for our nursery --talk with Nathalie Thompson. We're in a bit of transition just now, as one of the nursery team members had to return home to Israel for a family matter, so you could also talk with Nathalie if you could spend time with our youngest ones some Sunday in the next month or two.

So I noticed things like that about our churches on my visits here and there. But the most important part was, they were there. People had gathered to worship together in UU fashion, in buildings they kept up for just that purpose, to be together on their religious journeys.

I saw a sermon title once, "I didn't think I'd find a church that..." Many of you, I know, have had exactly that feeling upon discovering our religion. People have said, I thought I'd have to start one of my own ... and who knows if anyone else wants a religion like mine? I didn't know I'd find a church that ... that raises up the finest values without expecting concurrence regarding doctrine, a church that values freedom and faith

alike, a church that doesn't think it has all the answers but thinks it has some pretty great questions, questions that I'd been asking, practical questions about how to live my life with greater love and purpose and joy, questions about how to make the world a better, kinder, more just place. A church that has some answers, too, a heritage, some common principles, but ones that stay open to disagreement and change.

Ours are not the only congregations that are like that. But all of ours are like that – I could walk into the UU church in Castine, Maine, or Billings, Montana, and count on it being that kind of a church that many thought they'd never find.

Not that the morning was guaranteed to go well. Oh, no. Nor will all of the Sundays I do here be flawless. Actually, none of them will be. But if you're like me, it will still be a blessing that the church was here, a Unitarian Universalist church, and UUs had gathered in worship.

Someone lit a chalice, there was a familiar hymn and then one that wasn't, plus joys and sorrows and maybe concerns, all the details, the side street signs, and with it all, the reassuring sense that we were not lost at all but on the right path and heading (more or less) in just the right direction.