

“Being Found”

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The First Parish in Wayland

Reading

Context: The reading comes from the beginning of this coming-of-age novel by Ray Bradbury. 12-year-old Douglas has set out on an early summer day to pick berries with his father, grandfather, and his brother, Tom. Since waking that day, Douglas has felt as if there is a great “Thing” hovering nearby. He’s not sure what this “Thing” is—and whether it is malicious or kind.

“Got a snowflake in a matchbox,” said Tom, smiling at the wine-glove on his hand.

Shut up! Douglas wanted to yell. But no, the yell would scare the echoes, and run the Thing away.

And, wait...the more Tom talked, the closer the great Thing came, it wasn’t scared of Tom, Tom drew it with his breath. Tom was part of it!

[. . .] “Yes, sir,” mused Tom, picking grapes, “I’m the only guy in all Illinois who’s got a snowflake in summer. Precious as diamonds, by gosh. Tomorrow I’ll open it. Doug, you can look too...”

Any other day Douglas might have snorted, struck out, denied it all. But now, with the great Thing rushing near, falling down in the clear air above him, he could only nod, eyes shut.

Tom, puzzled, stopped picking berries and turned to stare over at his brother.

Douglas, hunched over, was an ideal target. Tom leaped, yelling, landed. They fell, thrashed, and rolled.

No! Douglas squeezed his mind shut. No! but suddenly . . . Yes, it’s all right! Yes! The tangle, the contact of bodies, the falling tumble had not scared off the tidal sea that crashed now, flooding and washing them along the shore of grass deep through the forest. Knuckles struck his mouth. He tasted rusty warm blood, grabbed Tom hard, held him tight, and so in silence they lay, hearts churching, nostrils hissing. And at last, slowly, afraid he would find nothing, Douglas opened one eye.

And everything, absolutely everything was there.

The world, like a great iris of an even more gigantic eye, which has also just opened and stretched out to encompass everything, stared back at him.

And he knew what it was that had leaped upon him to stay and would not run away now.

I’m alive, he thought.

Sermon

This is my copy of *Dandelion Wine*. a bit rugged from the years. I first read it sometime early in high school. I know I wasn't driving yet, because what I remember most is walking to the bus stop and paying attention to budding trees, the emerging flowers, the wisps of clouds in the sky. "I'm alive," I'd say to myself.

When I first read *Dandelion Wine*, I was an evangelical Christian. I attended church weekly, studied my Bible, and listened to Christian Rock—yes, there is such a thing.

Following the trend of the 1980's rise of mega-churches, our youth group began to put on monthly worship event in the auditorium of our public high school. (If that location surprises you....let's just say that in the religiously conservative West Michigan where I grew up, the church-state lines were sometimes a bit...*blurry*.) In this youth service, we used upbeat music, drama, and other "cool" technology of the time to appeal to what we called "seekers."

We understood "seekers"—or "the unchurched" as they were also called—to be those people in need of what we were offering. Seekers were those who were lost and we had what they were looking for. Except that the truth was that I was also a seeker. I was seeking to make sense of the religious tradition to which I had been born. And I was seeking to make sense of the world that felt too big, too unwieldy to a Midwestern, evangelical adolescent girl.

For me, searching for religious understanding led to a number of places. Over the years, I've spent various amounts of time in the Reformed Church of America (a Dutch offshoot of the Calvinist tradition), in a fundamentalist Methodist campmeeting, a high liturgy Episcopal congregation, an inner-city Lutheran church, an independent Liberal church, and, in the hybrid Congregationalist-Unitarian Universalist First Parish of Lincoln up the road. I've also been to Catholic masses, Jewish bat mitzvahs, and Islamic centers. I've read a lot of books and listened to both religious scholars and people of different faith traditions. I've searched and I've searched for religious understanding.

Does this sound familiar to some of you? Today most Unitarian Universalists are "come-in-ers"... people raised in a different or no tradition who choose to become Unitarian Universalist. This means that many of you probably have had some kind of religious search that led you *here* from another place. And, if you *did* grow up Unitarian Universalist, I suspect that the open, creedless nature of our movement means that you have also had to do some searching. Indeed, in a few weeks time, the Coming of Age class will be asked to stand up and share their Credo's...a statement of their own religious searching.

What would your Credo be? Where has your search for religious understanding or for meaning and purpose led you?

My search has led me here. To becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister. To becoming the candidate to be the next settled minister of this august congregation, The First Parish in Wayland.

This process of search for you and for me led here to this day. And so I entitled this sermon, “Being Found.” You’ve been found by me; I’ve been found by you. To be honest, I tried to come up with a less obvious title, but this one just stuck with me. Yet, this title *does* have two levels for me. One *is* the obvious—being found by one another. However, as you will come to learn about me, there is often a deeper, more philosophical level as well.

This deeper level has to do with the reading—a story that describes not only searching, but also being found. In the reading, Douglas goes out searching only for berries. Yet, when he woke that day, something was searching for him. The “great Thing” hovered at the edges of his consciousness, coming near, then slipping away again. He was both curious and afraid. What was this great Thing? And, why in the world did the Thing seem to be attracted by his younger brother chattering on about a snowflake in a freezer?!?

Then, Douglas felt the Thing finally start to fall upon him—descending through the clear sky came the promise of being found by the mysterious Thing. And all Tom saw was his brother stupidly standing there with his eyes closed. An easy target. He jumped. He tackled Douglas and they “fell, thrashed, and rolled.” The scene seems so ordinary. A walk on a summer day. Young kids telling stories. Siblings annoyed with and teasing each other.

Yet, for Douglas, the day was both mundane and *extra*-ordinary. For in this everyday moment of tumbling down a grassy hill, limbs tangled with his brother’s, Douglas came face to face with the world finding him. He opened his eyes to find the world staring at him “like a great iris of an even more gigantic eye.” He could see himself in the world. Not only was he looking at the world, the world was looking back at him. And in the reflection of that great iris . . . he saw himself as *alive*. He both found and was found by the Great mystery of simply being *alive*.

To me, Ray Bradbury’s prose captures the moment of coming-of-age, of becoming self-conscious of oneself in the world. It’s a big shift when we become self-aware that the world is that much bigger than oneself...that we are but one, small person in a much larger cosmos. Or, as our 7th principle says, that we are a part of an interconnected web of life.

To frame what it means to *be* in the world, I find the thoughts of 20th century, German philosopher Martin Heidegger to be helpful.

So, another thing to know about me is that I was a philosophy major in college. Fortunately, I had very generous parents who never asked me, “what are you going to do with that?!” I studied philosophy because it gave me a language for wrestling with the big questions of life. As such, philosophy and theory have become a part of my spiritual journey, of how I make sense of the world.

Heidegger, in his book *Being and Time*, explores what it means to simply *be*. Throughout his text, he uses the German word Dasein. Most simply, Dasein is the German word for existence. In Heidegger's hands, Dasein becomes a story of what it means to be a self, to be a person existing in the world. He *really* meant IN the world—he described Dasein as a single hyphenated word: Being-in-the-world. In other words, there's no such thing as being human or living a human life apart from being in relationship with all the many people, places, and creatures that constitute our shared world.

To further explain this idea of Being-in-the-world, Heidegger talks about Dasein as being *thrown* into the world. I love this active image of being *thrown*. No saccharin images of a stork gently flying in with a bundled, cooing infant. Rather, a self is *thrown* into the world—I imagine a kid flying off a rope swing into a lake . . . arms flailing and mouth open wide in a happy scream. There's no going back. You're in it now. Thrown into the midst of the world.

And it's a world that is already full of life, of other beings, persons, selves. Being thrown into the *world* means becoming part of something much larger than ourselves. Something that precedes our arrival and, most likely, will continue beyond our existence.

One way to think about this kind of *thrownness* into the world is the metaphor of arriving on stage in the midst of a play already in progress. How many of you have ever seen live improv theater performed? I've seen it a few times and am always amazed. The acting troupe will call out for an idea and then within minutes the actors are in motion, speaking and responding to each other – all without a shared script, without a pre-defined ending. Finding themselves in the midst of a scene, they must pay attention, learn on their feet, and choose how they are going to respond...how they are going to relate to the scene unfolding around them.

Arriving here as your candidate, I feel a bit like this . . . finding myself in the midst of a ongoing play with multiple people and parts, themes and storylines. In case you're wondering, yes, this can feel somewhat daunting. But, it *is* also very exciting. It is an honor to have been invited to join in your story...to imagine becoming a part of the next scene of First Parish.

In the interim period following Ken, you've already begun writing and rewriting what it means to be a congregation. You've done a lot of work through the process of search with surveys and cottage meetings, conversations with the search committee and with each other.

Welcoming me, a new character, onto the stage *will* change the story once again. As we dialogue, learn, and respond to one another, I expect that the narrative of this congregation will continue ... both in predictable and in unknown ways.

Newly "*thrown*" into the ongoing story of First Parish, I have a lot to learn about who all of the people sharing this stage are. I want to learn about your stories as individuals, as families, as small groups, as committees, and as a congregation. I want to learn about the storylines that have shaped who you have been and that continue to shape how you are

today. The events of this candidating week are all about creating opportunities for dialogue and conversation...for us to learn about one another as we begin to imagine and create the next set of scenes in the story of First Parish.

Alas all metaphors have their limits. In using the metaphor of a play and a stage, I want to be clear that I'm *not* suggesting that being your minister or the life of a church is only an act or a performance. For me, being together as a church is about as real as one gets in life. For here in this sacred space, we are all invited to bring our joys and our sorrows. Here in this sanctuary, we dedicate our beloved children, consecrate the love a couple has for one another, and honor the lives of those we love even beyond the horizon of death. Here in this meetinghouse, we come together to care for another in sadness and in loss; to be inspired to action and transformation; to seek new understanding as well as the renewal of spirit.

The process of search has led us all here. A search for a new minister. A search for a congregation. A search for a community. Hopefully, we are all here because we have found something that we were seeking. And I hope that we will all go on seeking and learning from one another.

May we also embrace *being found*—to feel something larger than ourselves falling down upon us, throwing us into a world where we are called into new relationships, new dialogue, and an ongoing, if uncertain, story. Whether we believe that this something more is the energy of Life or the loving face of God, may we be like Douglas and let the mystery of the great Thing fall upon us ... calling us to new affirmations of what it means to be *alive*.

Being found—discovering ourselves alive in the world—is not simply the end of a search, but the start of a new part of the story.

So may it be. Amen.