

“Four Landmarks on the Less Traveled Road”

June 13, 2010

New Members Sunday

United Church of Gainesville

Larry Reimer

“In summer the straight roads we take during other times of year give way to meandering, winding roads. To step out of the house on any of these days is to remember from childhood when swallows sang above a meadow and all the roads bent away, when a day was forever and all things conspired to search for ‘the More.’”

For a breath prayer focus on Isaiah 42:16

“I will lead the blind by a road they do not know,

By paths they have not known”

*Breath prayer - **a road/not known.***

Marv Hiles An Almanac for the Soul June 10-20

Matthew 5:38-48

Stages of Faith

I – Chaotic, antisocial

II – Formal, institutional

III – Questioning, individual

IV – Mystic, communal

(Scott Peck, The Different Drummer)

It's summer, and summer makes me think of childhood and youth, of wandering, with an “a,” and wondering with an “o.” I think of summer vacation bible school, where we sang “Jesus Loves Me”, somehow used blueprint paper to make impressions of ferns, visited a little fish pond in a church member's back yard, and all was very safe. I think of high school summer church camp, where I looked for signs of God from a grassy hillside I had retreated to alone at what was called morning watch. I remember watching water change into different hues on a lake at evening vespers in the Delaware Water Gap area of northern New Jersey. There I experienced for the first time a personal sense of faith growing out of the questions of my life.

I think of summers when I came home from college to the farm in Pennsylvania, reflecting on all the heady, if not sophomoric skepticism of new found knowledge. I think of the first summers in New Haven, as Sandy and I, newly married, experienced together the consciousness raising that was part of the 1960's at Yale Divinity.

I especially think of the first summers I served as a youth minister at the First Congregational Church in New Milford Connecticut when Sandy and I led high school summer camps at Silver Lake trying out new ways of sharing communion on an open field at night, lighting our

candles as we sensed our own glimmers of hope while Peter, Paul and Mary's "All Will Be Well When the Day is Done" echoed among us.

And I think of the special quality of early summers here at UCG where, with a break from all the busyness of the church year, I have experienced the reality of the quote read earlier of straight roads taken during other times of the year giving way to meandering, winding roads of mystical community.

Reflecting on summer, faith, and the journeys shared by our new members as well of all of you here made me think of landmarks on the journey of faith. Many people have written about developmental stages of faith, but I like Scott Peck's summary of four from his book, A Different Drummer that are listed in your bulletin.

Most young children and some adults fall into stage one, the chaotic, antisocial stage. It is quite natural for children to think that the world revolves around them, because for the first few years of life it does. They are sweet and kind, but quickly learn the word "mine". Gradually they discover the give and take of community. They learn the rules of right and wrong and find the joy of sharing and playing together.

For children then the first introduction to faith, to spiritual community, is typically the formal institutional setting of stage two. Religion is learning the Golden Rule and the Ten Commandments. What's fair and unfair is always on their minds. God is like a friendly school teacher or hall monitor in the sky who reminds you to get back in line, rewards you when you're good and gently punishes you when you're bad. This is how children move into stage two, formal institutional faith.

There are also people who grow into adulthood without ever making it out of the chaotic anti-social stage. They may be self-centered, amoral, and manipulative. They are governed by nothing but their own will. Some wind up in jail. Some are disciplined enough to manage their own ambition to become powerful leaders (including even presidents and preachers).

Adults in this stage often need a very structured religious institution to manage their lives. Rule oriented religion is often quite appealing and useful to some people who suffer from addiction or who have found themselves as repeat legal offenders. Strict fundamentalist churches are filled with preachers and members who have testimonies of being on the road to hell until they experienced the radical conversion that brought them into stage two, the formal, institutional church.

Most of us have had that stage two formal, institutional church experience. Most of you who are joining today and also most members of UCG, came from either the Catholic, Baptist or other rather structured, rule oriented churches.

At some point all who have been raised in highly, structured religious communities, whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist internalize these values and find meaning in an orderly life according to their faith's principles.

Often after we have internalized the values of our faith, the time comes when we realize we no longer need external doctrinal, institutional rules to run our lives. We move to landmark three – the questioning, individual stage of faith.

In our questioning we may define ourselves as atheists or agnostics. We don't feel it is necessary to believe in Jesus, or Moses, or Buddha, or Mohammed as the ultimate authority over our lives. We don't believe in a God out there.

While the beginning of stage three is questioning, the advanced part of stage three is seeking. This is where we look for new roads of meaning. In stage three we find more and more pieces of the puzzle, but never quite enough to put the whole puzzle together, so if we stay at this stage, we may remain at some level, agnostic.

When enough of the pieces of the puzzle come together to form a whole, we find ourselves moving to the fourth landmark, which is the mystical, communal stage of faith.

Mysticism is a strange and difficult word to define. I generally take it to mean finding a sense of unity and connection with all, between men and women, between races, between gay and straight, between humanity and nature, between different religions and paths to God. It is more of a horizontal faith that reaches out than a vertical faith that reaches up and down.

Mysticism also embraces mystery, the unknown, not to control it but to become part of it. We become good at getting rid of pre conceived notions, and we learn to enjoy the journey of constant discovery.

Many churches are best at level two, the formal institutional with room for stage four, the mystical communal. Many churches aren't so good at welcoming people in stage three, the questioning agnostic stage.

I think it's fair to say that UCG isn't so good at stage two, the formal institutional, but we're great at three, the questioning agnostic, and continually seek to grow better at four, the mystic communal.

There is good news and bad news in this for UCG.

The good news is that we welcome questions so well and we are so tuned to the possibilities of the mystical communal. The bad news is that because we're weak at stage two, the formal institutional, we're not so good in bringing folks from chaos into structure, especially children.

It's important, for example, to understand that our children do need a measure of the formal/institutional stage of faith. In our own intellectual, stage three need to be open minded, free thinking, questioning people, for example, we want to explain to our pre schoolers that the story of Noah and the Flood probably had its origin in some natural catastrophe that did cover that part of the earth, but certainly not the whole world, with water, and that all the Mesopotamian religions had mythic tales of the flood, from which the Genesis story drew on, and the ark was not a physical possibility for saving all the creatures of the

earth, and so forth. Meanwhile all the four year olds want to do is play with the animals and the boat and color rainbows.

It's important for us to give children the bible in its purest form, as story, and not to inflict our stage three ambiguity upon them before they're ready for it. We can let them experience the myths of creation and being loved by God, the stories of Jesus, the unfairness of his death and the hope of resurrection. And we can teach them that other faiths have their stories and their paths too.

The good news is that when these children grow to adolescence, do their own questioning, declare that they are agnostics, and say they don't believe in God, we can say, "Welcome to the questions. Tell me about that God you don't believe in because I bet I don't believe in that God either. And by the way, remember to share your questions on Senior Sunday."

And then we find stage four. I think the Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is all about moving from stage two to stage four faith. You know it well. "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth' But I say to you, do not resist the evil doer... You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...'"

It's not that Judaism is stage two and Christianity is stage four. People live through these different stages in every religion. There are peaceful Jews, Muslims, and Christians, and there are Jews, Muslims, and Christians ready to fight a holy war at the drop of a hat because they are still in stage two.

I believe that the true spiritual journey of any tradition calls us to stage four, the mystic communal, but we have to travel through all these stages. We can't reach stage four without the questions of stage three. Without the structure of stage two we can't counter the self-centered chaos of stage one. We carry with us elements of each stage, and we can revert to previous stages at any point along the way. The spiritual journey is not a straight line. It's more like a loop de loop of spiraling relearning. True community is made up of people all over the map on this road and each stage of growth happens in community.

At some level none of these stages of growth is the result of our efforts, but the result of the call of God deep within into a new level of awareness. The point of it all is to live with each other in community. And perhaps the final point is to be aware that even at what we call stage four, what we might think to be the ultimate, mystical, communal goal of faith, is still most truly, the beginning.

(Scott Peck's The Different Drum, Simon & Schuster, 1987, is a good resource on these developmental stages of faith. He summarizes the works of Erik Erickson and James Fowler in collapsing developmental stages of faith into four key categories).