

Chop Wood, Carry Water

February 10th, 2008

It's funny how long it sometimes takes for me to discover places. Now in my eighth month of living in Austin—South Austin—I only just these past few days found my way, thanks to some friends, to the stretch of the greenbelt just east of Mopac, off of Barton Skyway, where the riverbed is flat, wide, blanched, dry, and the rocks are ready to be walked and hopped upon—the stretch where the luxurious houses peak over the cliff face and I, peering up from below, ask myself questions about erosion.

My dog, padding along beside me, sniffs her way along the time- and water-smoothed stone, and gives none of *her* time to the houses above, or how long they may last there. She sniffs, nose to the ground, as if her mantra is “Here, here, here...” while there, above, the houses loom, craning their decks for the perfect view. Looking down, they might see my

dog, me, some homeless people who retreat from the concrete of Ben White to make this place their sanctuary; some litter, rings of old fires. I imagine after the rains, and the rise of the river, residents of those homes will look down to see and hear the splashing of dozens of swimmers a day. I imagine the view is great. But I still wonder about erosion, and how it must feel to be living on the edge, so to speak.

In these days of subprime mortgages, seemingly countless foreclosures, and my own mountain range of student loans, I know I'd be not living on the edge, but leaping off it, were I to pursue right now my personal dream of owning my own little home. I stick, for now, to picking out for fun that one, or that one, or maybe that one, as I drive through South Austin neighborhoods. And I stay, for now, in an apartment that keeps me quite content. After all, *I've* got a view, too, of scrappy oaks and scampering squirrels, feral cats, and the

occasional neighbor dog, walking by, sniffing, too, “here, here, here...”

And I have here—this sanctuary, this place where I bring my days and stories back, to weave them in with yours; where, on Sunday mornings, I gratefully experience a gathering of the beloved community I seek to minister to and with. And I can tell you that, from here, this beloved community is a beautiful view. Our home’s not grand, nor is it on prime land with a river carved through it. But here, in the beloved community of Wildflower Church, here is where, as the poet T’ao Ch’ien says, “Often and often the neighbors come to see me and with brave words discuss the things of old.” Here is where “Rare writings we read together and praise; doubtful meanings we examine together and settle.”

Such was my impetus for, as T’ao Ch’ien’s poem is entitled, moving house down to Texas last summer. I came to live in this “Southern Village” of Austin “not because I had

taken a fancy to the house...” but because I sensed that here were Unitarian Universalists with whom it would be, as the poem says, “a great joy to spend the morning and evening.”

And I imagine, for *most* of us, honestly, some kind of moving house is what brought us here. After all, Wildflower Church is far too young for all but the youngest of us to have been born into it. Actually, it was today’s fearless lay leader’s second daughter, Josie, who was the first child born into this home. For the vast majority of us, however, whether it was your own *personal* moving house from the north side or from out of town or out of state, or a moving of *religious* houses, from Baptist or Methodist, Church of Christ or Catholic, to Unitarian Universalism, something you needed landed you here, at Wildflower Church. Welcome. May you find here, and continue to find here, things of old to be discussed, writings to read and praise, doubtful meanings to examine and settle, and the neighbors with whom, often and often, to do these things.

May you also find here, though, that while we have no Christ Crucified hanging behind the preacher to remind us all of his sacrifice; while we have no stained glass saints or martyrs to model how far we should go for our faith, while we have not even a compassionate Buddha to guide us back to mindfulness, we do have St. John's Wort, Aster, and Mexican Hat.... Hmmmm. Pretty, you may think. Quaint.

But never underestimate the power of a wildflower. There is meaning in our name, and it's not just about being colorful. As some of you know, the St. John's Wort represents our roots in Eastern Europe, where in the early 1500's, Unitarian prophet Francis David proclaimed, "In this world there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation. You need not think alike to love alike." The aster is symbolic of our New England heritage, and Unitarians like writer Henry David Thoreau, who declared, "I wish to live deliberately, to front only the essentials of life. I wish to learn what life has to teach

and not, when I come to die, discover that I have not lived.”
And the Mexican Hat? Well, here, in South Austin, is where it’s at. Here is where the Unitarian Universalist baton, or bouquet, gets passed on to us. How shall we receive it?

At our January visioning meeting with district executive Susan Smith, 32 of us explored what it means to be and live as a wildflower, particularly in this southwestern landscape. As I recollected of our exploration in my column for the February newsletter, “Wildflowers are inherently diverse, even *depend* on diversity. They thrive in otherwise difficult soils, proving themselves to be survivors. They are volunteer plants, readily willing to grow. They are dependable, and they are beautiful. Whether growing in a garden or in the wild of the hill country, or perhaps both, with the gate open wide, wildflowers draw people in.”

So yes, we are a beautiful gathering. But our name reminds us that part of what creates that beauty is the

diversity, dependability, and determination that live implicitly in our name.

And so we must be *determined* to live *into* these qualities if we are to truly live *out* our wildflower life. We must *depend* on ourselves and each other to grow both within this garden of our own sanctuary, and to flood out beyond the open gates, into the countryside surrounding us. We must strive to live in the understanding that *diversity* means not only theological or spiritual diversity, but diversity of race, sex, class, sexual and gender orientation, abilities, ages, talents, gifts, and needs.

Therefore, going back for a moment to Time for All Ages, I say now, I smell a rat. In fact, I think I smell about well over a hundred rats right here in this room. Yes, I am ratting you out. In these first days of the Chinese New Year, in which we enter the Year of the Rat, symbol of both industriousness and renewal, I am asking you to put on your rat hats and work for

this church like its life and its renewal depend on you.

Because, guess what? It does. It always has, and always will.

For instance, did you know that every Sunday morning, one of three teams of two (or one team of one!) comes an hour and a half early to set up all these chairs? That's *two* people, sometimes just *one*, in their Sunday-go-meetin' clothes, folding up tables left from the night before, putting them in the closet, and gathering all the chairs in nice curved lines, so that when the rest of us come in, it looks like we're walking in to church.

Now, we've been trying for some time to set up a better, more "spread the industriousness around" set up system, but so far, it's the few, the proud, the exhausted. Not a lot of renewal. So some of us are beginning to wonder, if we can't donate our Sunday morning time, maybe we can consider donating our Sunday morning money (but saving plenty for the offering, of course), to hire a sexton who will be paid to do

the set up. It's up to the rat pack—that is, us—to decide how best to be industrious in that matter. But we must be willing to do the work to improve that system.

On another level, where the sweat may be more relational than physical, we need to work together to create a church-wide covenant of right relations—not because we're all a bunch of rat-finks, gnawing away at each other's well being, but because we are human beings, and sometimes, even in beloved community, human beings struggle with relationships, and they get cranky with each other, and need to be called back to peaceful co-existence. A covenant is a form of calling ourselves back. So, when you hear the newly formed Committee on Ministry calling you all to gather to create such a covenant, we hope you will heed that call.

Same thing goes for updating our mission and vision, which will actually be worked on *before* the covenant, in order to inform it. Now, I've already given Charles Bisantz a nod for

being the papa of the first born Wildflower Child, but I want to thank him too, for the online survey he's created, with some help from the rest of the Committee on Ministry—a survey which will be going out to all of you in a matter of weeks, to help us determine what our core congregational values are, and what you all perceive to be Wildflower's strengths, as well as our growing edges. Please take the survey once it's available in early March. We want to live into our fourth principle, which calls for the “right of conscience and the use of democratic process in our congregations....”

Finally, I want us to consider one more element of the Rat and this Year of the Rat, in the context of our congregation. A website specializing in the Chinese Zodiac states, regarding this time, that “Ventures begun now may not yield fast returns, but opportunities will come for people who are well prepared and resourceful. The best way for you to succeed is to be patient, let things develop slowly, and make

the most of every opening you can find.” Now, remember the story of Lyndon Johnson’s grandfather and great uncle? “...for all the romance of the Cattle Kingdom, the men who became its barons—the Goodnights and Chisums and Kings—were, above all else, businessmen. The Johnson brothers were not.... for they wanted more land, much more, and to get it, they mortgaged to the hilt what they already owned.... They assembled a fortune on the hoof. They bet everything they owned and everything they could borrow on another successful year. / And in the Hill Country, that was a bad bet to make.”

Members and friends of Wildflower Church, understanding that the Hill Country, literally and figuratively, is right out there, and that it spills down into our good city, let us not be like the Johnson brothers. Let us not assemble a fortune on the hoof, but be strategic. Let us look out on the range before us with a long range plan. And, funny I should

suggest such a thing, because we already have one! The 2006-2009 long-range plan that this congregation voted for is a three-part plan, and we are one third of the way (something about getting a fulltime minister) through it. But we still *plan* to have a building of our own, rented or purchased; and we still *plan* to hire a part-time office staff person, to help with administrating the business of the church. The Board, the Capital Campaign committee, and the Building task force are working on fulfilling these essential two-thirds of this plan. Though we need to shift the window of time in which the capital campaign drive will occur, no matter when it starts up, remember: each of us must work like the life of this church depends on us, because it does.

And when Tom Moran and the rest of the *new* long-range planning committee begin to ask for your input in creating *new* plans even further into our future, remember: each of us

must work like the life of this church depends on us, because it does.

Now, because it's a rat race out there, I want to assure you that when I say we must work like the life of the church depends on us, I am *not* asking any one of you to put *more* time and energy into this church than you *are able*. In fact, we need to look for ways to move *away* from things like our *volunteer* treasurer putting in up to twenty hours a week of her time. We need to look for ways to move *away* from parents not being able to attend more services, because they are the core volunteers teaching the children in religious education. The Year of the Rat asks that we work, but it asks that we work in the spirit of renewal. So we must *share* the work of supporting and building this church. We must *share* the work of moving beyond our wildflower garden gates and into the South Austin community, which needs us as a liberal religious presence acting for peace and justice.

Just as it took me months to find a beautiful stretch of Austin along which to walk my dog, we don't know how many people out there are not yet even aware of this liberal religious community, but who will celebrate its presence the moment they step through our doors. Just as we don't know in what building of our own we will some day live, we don't know who will seek its sanctuary, or what great work will be done there, or what great sense of spirit will fill its spaces, or what newborn babe will be its *firstborn* babe. But if we wish to live up to our wildflower name, one which implies diversity, determination, and dependability, then we must work our way *into* our future. Let us take heed of this Year of the Rat, and do so together.

And that—*rats!*—is the end of my sermon.

Amen.