

Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself
January 31, 2010

As some of you know, before I went to seminary, became a Unitarian Universalist minister, and moved deep into the heart of Texas, I lived in the town of Northampton, Massachusetts, near the western banks of the Connecticut River. *I* settled in Northampton in late 1996, but the town itself was first settled by Europeans in 1654 as a farming community. Since 1871, when Smith College was founded, Northampton's also been a college town. Smith has had a strong influence on the life of Northampton, and it was the town's cultural richness, its out and proud lesbian population, its New England beauty, and its convenient proximity to Boston and New York, that initially drew me to the town.

Early in my time in Northampton, I learned that many people affectionately (and perhaps slightly obnoxiously) refer to the town as NoHo. Me, I stuck with its more formal name,

but NoHo became a term I tolerated, was used to... Then, about three years into my living there, I was talking to some Unitarian Universalist eighth graders about what high schools they were going to be entering, when one student responded, “I’m going to go to Hamp High.” “Hamp High?” I thought, “What’s that?” Soon I learned that not only was Northampton High School known by some as “Hamp High,” but that Northampton itself was known among a large population *not* as NoHo, but as Hamp.

Who was that large population that gave Northampton this other nickname? The old families—families who had farming and mill worker roots. Families who had generations of history here. Families who weren’t necessarily thrilled with Northampton’s reputation as a liberal, lesbian friendly town with hip cafes, sushi bars, and bookish bookstores.

As a non-Northampton native—in fact, this was the third place in a row I’d lived, New York City being the first, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, being the second, where town natives are a rarity—as a non-Northampton native, this NoHo-Hamp dichotomy awakened me from my outsider’s naïveté about the town’s identity, and I found myself asking, “So just what is the real Northampton?”

Well, I’ve never come up with a clear or clean answer, but now that I’m here, once again a non-native in a town with a rarity of natives, I imagine, here in *this* town, nearly two thousand miles from New England, we might similarly ask, “Just what is the real Austin?” Austin native and Wildflower member Nancy York might consider the real Austin to be, as she once put it to me, the “little village on the Colorado River,” where she used to live just down the street from the court house. Another Wildflower member, Alex Nelson, who moved

here in the early seventies, might think, “the real Austin does *not* expand MOPAC south, across and beyond the river, and it *definitely* doesn’t include the Barton Creek Mall!”

We, each of us, have an image, an idea in our minds, of what the *real* Austin *is*. And yet many of us, maybe even most of us, have contributed to making Austin something other than what it once *was*. Such is the conundrum of change. With change, it is not always so easy to distinguish the thing itself from an idea of the thing.

Remember, for instance, the box, for sale at an antiques fair—the box, whose “paint, a rusty salmon color,” initially bespoke *age* to writer, and purchaser, Richard Todd. The box, which, upon further study, “months or even weeks ago... had been a little pile of wood” in a woman’s workshop. By its very deceptive, fraudulently antique appearance, the box had lied

to its buyer. With such deception, or at least illusion, where did Todd's *idea* of the box end and the box itself begin?

Perhaps spurred on by this incident, Todd himself chose not to retreat into self-protection from such, at times embarrassing, what he calls "self-diminishing" questions, but to explore the *many* ways in which we seek authenticity—the real thing—and how we are at times deceived, dismayed, and detoured by those things, events, and experiences which profess to be one thing, but which clearly, or not so clearly, end up being something else.

In his book, *The Thing Itself: On the Search for Authenticity*, Todd explores not only objects, such as his ego deflating, wallet depleting box, but locations, society, time, even our own place in the world. For instance, in a passage about travel, Todd writes (and I quote here at length):

After a long morning's drive through the Umbrian hill country, you have happened upon an inn. Is it open for

lunch? You're in luck. Moreover, what a pleasant place it turns out to be—the rough stone walls, the crisp table linen and abundant glassware. The waiter seems to speak only Italian, at least he is grateful for your own efforts, and conversation in that seductive language is heard all across the room. This is very good, and the menu is appealing too in its simplicity, and as you sip your Montepulciano and dip your crustini in olive oil in anticipation of the tagliatelle funghi to come, you and your companion smile a complicit smile: you are really here, you have never felt so much a part of Italy before.

For what happens next [Todd continues,] there should be a precise word, because it is a pain so acute, specific, and at bottom ridiculous. What happens is that another couple arrives and is seated (out of some misbegotten kindness?) next to you. They are speaking English. Really, they are speaking American, and you could be more accurate than that: judging by their o's and s's you can tell they come from the Midwest, probably from Minnesota. It occurs to you in a fleeting moment that although you don't like knowing this, you would be very pleased with yourself if you had such a

fine knowledge of *Italian* regional accents. You feel churlish for letting these poor people bother you, and you realize they are probably just as disappointed to see you as you are to see them. At that, you manage a weak smile in their direction, an acknowledgment of defeat. The smile is returned, and the moment ends in rueful comedy.

This time, it is not so much the object—not the inn, not the “rough stone walls, the crisp table linen and the abundance of glassware,” not the waiter who seems to speak only Italian—it is not these things that belie an authenticity, in this case an Italian-ness. This time it is the very people traveling there from elsewhere, in search of that authenticity.

“What is it we want from travel?” Todd asks, in response to this scenario. “Travel affords a kind of liberation,” he says. “People speak of ‘escape’ and at its best travel provides escape

from the mundane and tedious....” A traveler feels, says Todd, “wonderfully unimplicated in the world.”

But while we might see, or wish to see, ourselves as unimplicated travelers, with our identity floating “free of its surroundings,” Todd reminds us of another, less attractive term, “tourist,” a term which alleged travelers tend to give to anyone else happening to do the same thing. Todd quotes one such traveler, quite well known, this way: “Tourists are vulgar, vulgar, vulgar,’ said Henry James, who traveled, or thought he did.”

The implication in these travel notes of Todd’s is that, however much the idea of travel may seduce us to believe we will, for a time, be “unimplicated in the world,” invisible witnesses to “the real thing,” we, by our very presence, are implicated in how we change the “real place” we travel to.

Now, in sharing Richard Todd's Italian misadventure with you, my point is not to say, "stay home, people. You're ruining Europe." That's not it. In fact, my point might not be a point at all, but a long, slow *question* of how we seek authenticity in our lives, how we sometimes stumble, and how we might come to know the mystery, as we recited together earlier, that, "if that which you seek, you find not within yourself, you will never find it without. For behold, I have been with you from the beginning, and I am that which is attained at the end of desire."

Desire. We desire, among other things, authenticity. We desire *real* lives, real connections, real happiness. And yet that very same desire can be as misbegotten as the kindness of the Italian waiter seating the two American couples near each other at the Inn. Desire, unabated, uneducated, too often drives us to seek only outside ourselves what so often needs to

be found within. I think of various forms of addiction as manifestations of that outwardly driven self-seeking.

Consumerism (or is that just synonymous to addiction?) is another manifestation, as may be, for instance, Henry VIII's six marriages or actress Elizabeth Taylor's eight.

Again, none of this is to say, stay home. Don't buy anything, especially not salmon colored boxes, don't travel anywhere, and don't fall in love with anyone, because it's all just an illusion, especially when we put ourselves into the equation. This is not about hunkering down. Rather, the aspiration may be to stay still long enough to take things in as they really are, no matter where or who or how we are.

This is the experience, it seems to me, of the persona in Wallace Stevens' poem, "Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself," which we heard Jeff read earlier. True, the real things—the rising sun, the bird's cry—do come from the

outside, and only initially seem, “like a sound in his mind.” “It was not,” the poem says, “from the vast ventriloquism/ of sleep’s paper-mache.../ the sun was coming from the outside.”

But because of the care, because of the mindfulness with which the persona is witness to and in relationship with his surroundings, the poem ends not with a “slight sense of diminished self,” nor in “rueful comedy,” but with the poignant understanding that open witness to such beauty, such a simple reality as the rising sun accompanied by the bird’s cry, is “like a new knowledge of reality.”

In reality, we will always bring change to whatever it is we wish to experience in its purest form. Similarly, we will always encounter those “boxes”—whether in the shape of a box, or a house, or a city, or a person—we will encounter those people, places, and things that will eventually reveal themselves as something other than they originally appeared

to be. But with mindfulness, with attention to ourselves in relation to the other, we can strive to be in authentic relationship with the world—even amidst—*especially* amidst—the conundrum of change.

As we, as a religious community, welcoming in new members and reaching out to the wider community, continue to deepen and to grow, both individually and collectively, let us remember we live together, and *journey* together in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Sometimes we will surprise ourselves by how we affect our surroundings by our very presence, and sometimes we will find that things are not going quite as we expected them to. But if we remain mindful, if we seek within at least as much as without, we will indeed find ourselves and the world around us transformed by actions of compassion, love, and social justice. It is in that spirit I invite us each and all to continue on in our journeys,

discovering along the way, not only the ideas about the thing, but the thing itself. May that thing be, among other things, the beloved community Wildflower Church strives to be.

Amen.

#168 One More Step