Coming To Home

A Sermon Preached by Rose Schwab
at Wildflower Unitarian Universalist Church
Sunday, February 20, 2011

I grew up in Minnesota. And we were involved with a wonderful Unitarian Universalist camp. It was on an island up north and it was called Unistar. When I was 5, my mom, dad, brother, and I went for a week called Work Week. During this spring gathering, a close group of friends called the Management Committee prepared the camp for the summer. We had just moved to Minnesota, and this was a pivotal week in our lives.

My parents soon joined the management committee. We began to spend more and more time at Unistar.

Being a child there was magical. There was a lake in the middle of island that was in the middle of the lake, there were trails, there were trees, there were loons and fish and owls and raspberries and motorboats, sand dunes…and it was like your parents sort of let you free.

And then my father became the director of Camp Unistar. And I lived on the island all summer.

I felt so enmeshed at Unistar. Truly, Unistar was my home. I felt such belonging, and like there was nothing more that I needed to be. I was so seen. And there was a whole week for just the youth. We planned it, we organized it, we had our own youth culture, and it was so much fun.

For 11 years my father ran the camp. And then, suddenly, it ended. On a November night, five years ago. The management committee held a secret meeting where they voted to remove my father from his position. Several days later, some of our closest friends barged into our home and stole my father's bookkeeping records, journals and address books. They wrote a letter to the campers that praised him for his work and said he resigned to do other things.

No one from Unistar has spoken to us since. We have asked over and over for a peace circle or group counseling and have been repeatedly denied.

The big question was: What did we do? Why did this happen? Well, it happened because there were some really inept people in a poorly governed organization who had a lot of pressure on them. But still, how could we deserve this? We gave our whole selves to Unistar. And then BOOM, we were out. The effects of this ostracism were nightmarish. We all just sort of unraveled. My dad became ghostly. He was unable to speak for a long time. My mom could barely leave the house. Our world was completely enmeshed and intertwined with everyone who went to Unistar. Our neighborhood, the gym, the co-op, book groups, church.

I took it pretty hard too. What else were people capable of? Why couldn't I dream any more? Without my community to reflect back to me who I was, who was I? It seemed I had become this person who experienced boiling rage and doubted love. I was homeless and uncomfortable. But in retrospect, this breakdown was really good. In fact, it made way for a grand awakening.

I knew I wasn't going home to Unistar for a long time. Instead, I was awarded a grant from my college, and I traveled around the world, just me.

First I went to Transylvania, and lived in a rural Unitarian Village. In case you didn't know, there is another branch of Unitarians in Transylvania. They are culturally distinct but have similar roots, and radical beliefs. And there people were REALLY nice to me. I didn't speak any Hungarian, so I was just learning it when I got there. And somehow I got the word for hello mixed up with the word for Nylon sack. So basically I was just going through my day, and when I saw somebody, I'd yell, "Nylon saaaack!" And they would yell, "Nylon saaaack!" right back at me. I felt like they knew about Unistar; never thought they didn't. They were just that kind. They were putting bunnies in my lap and feeding me strawberry jam and giving me to the old women, who literally spent hours feeding me cookies. There was one elderly woman who would hand feed me cookies. I'd be walking down the road and I'd see her and we wouldn't even stop. She'd reach out, put a cookie in my mouth, and, crunch!, I'd keep going for my walk. And of course, I went to see the Unitarian high school and the Unitarian college and the Unitarian Seminary and I am so thankful I did because I was reminded that Unitarianism is a profoundly beautiful religion.

After 2 months, I got on the train to Southern France where I put on my tennies and started walking westward. I was walking an ancient pilgrimage route called El Camino de Santiago. I had no map; all I did was follow the yellow arrows. I walked for 40 days. I basked in the shade of trees that dripped of cherries, and slept in the pews of catholic sanctuaries. And in those sanctuaries were a lot of statues of Jesus. I was walking all this time by myself, unable to speak about my heart that ached so badly. And then I'd go to bed, and I'd look up and I'd see Jesus's face contorted with pain, and I'd think, "Jesus is my best friend." He *is* the omnipresent soul of suffering. He was saying, "don't try to hide it, girl; being human is painful." And so I just felt all that pain. And it felt holy to feel my pain. When I was grieving, I felt like I was next to the divine.

This journey had one last stop. India. In short, I lived in a Monastery and shaved off all my hair and took vows and got a new name and meditated all day and ate soup with my fingers. But that's a whole other sermon. What I learned is: this worldly life we live is inherently heart wrenching. Buddhism is built on the idea that everything is impermanent. Everything passes away. And the Buddhists believe that the more we want things to stay the same, the more stuck we are.

And believe me, I had a vice grip on Unistar.

I took to meditating early in the morning, before the sun rose. I sat east, towards the river, which was a wide, silty, slow moving river that was ankle deep all the way across. And while I sat, with my eyes closed, my mind resting on my breath, I'd feel the sun's warmth drip down my face as it rose in a huge red globe over the water. And when you listen to your breath pretty soon you forget that you're there and all you can hear is the air swooshing around in you like you've got not innards at all. And with that, I began to let go of Unistar.

When I was ready to come home, I was aware of my selfishness. My parents couldn't run off and gallivant around the world. They spent that winter in sub- zero Minnesota, weeping and cursing their best friends.

But, something amazing happened. Just as I was given the beautiful gift of escape, so were my parents.

U-Bar-U, which is a UU camp here in Texas, asked my father to be the director. Mountain Home, Texas, oddly enough, was where my family came to grieve. And that, folks, was the start of my home in Texas. So, I was offered this job and Martin, who is my partner, and I moved here.

And I want you all to know that I take my job here very seriously. I have had the unique experience of being excluded from a Unitarian community, I don't want any of these young people to ever feel like I did. Growing up in this tradition is an irreplaceable opportunity. I want them; their home wants them. I want them to belong, I want them to feel worthiness, I want them to come here to grapple with their world and their hearts and play us their awesome technological music and feel SAFE.

Home is a very important thing to have, and therefore a terrible thing to lose, but also everything that happens to you in your life is ripe with meaning. I would never have known about true hospitality had I not gone to Transylvania. I wouldn't be a religious scholar if I hadn't discovered the beauty of world religions like Catholicism, and I wouldn't have my perspective on life had I not gone to India. I wouldn't have fallen in love with Martin, and I wouldn't be here with you all. Ya'll.

And isn't it funny that here I am, having lost a home. And I somehow ended up in a church that is looking for a home. And let me tell you, this place is put together right. This congregation might need a space of our own to worship, but Wildflower isn't lacking anything in terms of being a good home.