

“In gratitude for that fine discontent, for that refusal to conform, let me say it one last time: Betty, you changed our lives.” Ellen Goodman of Betty Friedan

“I believe all Americans who believe in freedom, tolerance and human rights have a responsibility to oppose bigotry based on sexual orientation.” Coretta Scott King

“Finding Our Places”

the Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson
Walpole Unitarian Church

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Wild Geese, Mary Oliver

Matthew 15:21-28

JLA On Being Human Religiously, p.131

Today is Evolution Sunday. Did you know that? Most likely, you’ve never heard of it. It’s not sponsored by the government – no surprise there. You are not going to find it on a new 2 cent stamp, or a poster displayed in your kid’s science class. This Evolution Sunday is different. It’s a church-based movement - a liberal church based movement.

I am reminded of the Whos in Whoville, in Dr. Suess’s book, Horton Hears a Who. In that book, if you recall, no one believes that there are any Whos living on the speck of dust that Horton is protecting. Horton has them yelling, together, “We are here, we are here, we are HERE!”

They can’t seem to get heard, and they scour the town to see if they can find anyone who is not contributing their voice. They

find one shirker. Remember? And when that one small shirker adds his voice to the collective yell, they are heard.

Well, Evolution Sunday is kind of like that. It is a project initiated by Michael Zimmerman and the National Center for Science Education, defending the teaching of evolution in the public schools. It is a project whose necessity is disturbing – but necessary it is. The teaching of science has been under attack in the name of defending religion. My religion, our religion does not need to be protected from science. I don't know about you, but I for one am sick and tired of the radical Christian right giving religion a bad name, and in particular giving Christianity a bad name. I am not alone in that.

A few month's ago Michael Zimmerman began circulating a letter to Christian Clergy inviting them to sign it. The letter said:

We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or treat it as 'one theory among others' is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children. We believe that among God's good gifts are human minds capable of critical thought and that the failure to employ this gift is a rejection of the will of our Creator... We urge school board members to preserve the integrity of the science curriculum by affirming the teaching of evolution as a core component of human knowledge. We ask that science remain science, and that religion remain religion, two very different but complementary forms of truth."

Ten thousand members of the Christian clergy signed that letter. I was one of them, and one among many Unitarian Universalist ministers who chose to do so, each adding our one small voice to the collective voice calling “We are here, we are here, we are HERE!”

Some who supported it and who chose not sign it were UU ministers who do not consider themselves Christian. Some UU ministers who do not consider themselves Christian in the commonly understood use of the word did sign it because they understand their Unitarian Universalist faith to be grounded in its own liberal Christian roots and is itself an expression of evolution, the evolution a liberal Christian faith into a faith with an expanded embrace that still includes that liberal Christianity, and now so much more.

That is important. Our faith tradition embraces an evolving physical world and the discipline of science that seeks to understand it. But more than that, we believe, and we participate in an evolving faith and an evolving social order in which that faith is lived and practiced. When Theodore Parker said that the arc of the universe is long, and that it bends toward justice he was speaking about his faith in a world that is evolving in ethics, consciousness, social responsibility and justice. Like Parker, in my

lifetime, and in yours, we have seen incredible evolutionary shifts in the understandings of human dignity, human rights, and justice.

Last Sunday, when you were having church here without me, I was doing something I rarely get to do. I went to church with my daughter and grand daughter. They go to the First Unitarian Church in Worcester, and Tom Shade, the associate minister offered a pastoral reflection stimulated by Mary Oliver's poem *Wild Geese*, that we read this morning.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting-over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

Tom read those lines and was whisked back to the days when he was in the second grade. He remembered the class being divided into reading groups. Each in turn would get to come up to the front, form a circle, and have their reading time with the teacher. Maybe it was your experience too. You would sit and take turns reading aloud. There were two major terrors lurking in that reading circle. One was that when it was your turn to read, there would be a word too big and difficult to pronounce. The other, was that you would lose your place. Suddenly the words would start swimming. You came to the end of one line, and found yourself picking up on another, but suddenly nothing made sense. That is what happens, isn't it, when you lose your place?

All of a sudden things are not where you expect them to be, connections are broken and nothing makes sense.

It is not that different now. When we lose our place, whatever place that is, the place that we know, we become confused, disoriented, unsure of ourselves and of what we are supposed to be doing or being. Identities are shaken, loosened, reformed. But first, they are shaken.

When we lost a job, or gained a new position, when we graduated from school and had to establish a career, when we became a parent, or widow, a husband or a wife, a cancer patient, a survivor, a retiree, when our parents were divorced, or we were...each of these were moments when we lost our place, the place we had inhabited, the place we knew, and another place, maybe facing in a very different direction, had to be established.

That's how evolution is, you know. It is not a slow smooth easing from one thing into another. It is a jolt, and a shift and a definite change. A mutation, something new and different happens - suddenly, and it, this new thing, needs to find its place in the world, needs to find its place in the family of things. And that place finding can take some time.

Two women died last week, women who pushed, prodded and accelerated the evolution of our times, women who challenged the place into which we had put ourselves in the family of things.

Betty Friedan and Coretta Scott King. They were the jolt. Just as in biological evolution, they introduced something new to the community, and nobody's place could stay the same. They disrupted. They disoriented. They were difficult. – for us, and often for themselves. It was not easy, being a believer in social evolution. It was not easy because of the pain and tension any prophet or change agent engenders in themselves and others. It was not easy because a true believer in the evolution of human consciousness, of the human spirit, and of society, has to be prepared to be changed themselves.

Just as others who have fought for justice have found the road took them to places they had not meant to go, Coretta Scott King against her own resistance and to the dismay of some who could not step out on the road with her, in her later years said:

“I believe all Americans who believe in freedom, tolerance and human rights have a responsibility to oppose bigotry based on sexual orientation.”

Some thought she had lost her place. And in some ways she had. She had lost her old place, and had found a new one, a new one more congruent with the values by which she had lived her life, a place she had never expected to inhabit, but which integrity told her she must. I wonder what evolutionary, jarring shifts there might be in my life, or in yours, what ones there are that we resist

until the tension between our beliefs and our behaviors becomes too great to ignore, and we must change, listen to the world that is calling, announcing our new place in the family of things.

That happened to Jesus. I love that the scripture captures the moment, the moment when Jesus lost his place, when faced with the implications of what he was espousing he had either to back pedal, or take the plunge, step out into a new place and become the prophet of universalism he was destined to be. He starts out intending to reform Judaism, to reform the way things are done in his land by his people. He was sent as a prophet to Israel. He thought. And then there is the woman who challenges him, who says, If you really believe what you are doing and saying about God's love for the people, then surely, it must be for all of us, not just your own kind. Jesus shakes his head. NO that cannot be...and then it hits him. She has knocked him right off of his place, and he knows it. He knows that she is right, and that the place to which the universe has called him, the place the universe is announcing, it different from the one he has been occupying. His calling is to a much larger world.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting-over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

What is your place in the family of things? And often we spend our whole lives seeking it. But maybe the truth of it is, that the place is not fixed. It moves. It changes, it evolves. There is no finding one's place in the universe once and for all. The certainty, is that there is a place, always there is a place for you, for us. That is the guarantee. But we cannot cling to it, and grow. We cannot cling to it and live. Always it calls, announcing, and as with any location in motion, the places announced will change as the journey progresses.

That is the truth, the hard and wondrous, harsh and exciting way of the world, and of life in it. We have been blessed by some amazing people who have taught us how, with wisdom and grace, to give up the place that no longer serves, evolving into ever wiser, ever deeper, ever more compassionate souls.

To paraphrase Ellen Goodman then, I say on our behalf,

"In gratitude for that fine discontent, for that refusal to conform, let me say it one last time: Betty Friedan, Coretta Scott King, Jesus of Nazareth, you changed our lives."

We are grateful. And may there be those who come after, who can say it of us.