

What To Do With Your Summer Vacation
A Sermon Offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia
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We live in a wonderful world that is full of beauty, charm and adventure. There is no end to the adventures we can have if only we seek them with our eyes open.
~Jawaharal Nehru

Readings

Our first reading is from The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien:

All that the unsuspecting Bilbo saw that morning was an old man with a staff. He had a tall pointed blue hat, a long grey cloak, a silver scarf over which his long white beard hung down below his waist, and immense black boots.

“Good morning!” said Bilbo, and he meant it. The sun was shining, and the grass was very green. But Gandalf looked at him from under long bushy eyebrows that stuck out further than the brim of his shady hat. “And a very fine morning for a pipe of tobacco out of doors, into the bargain. If you have a pipe about you, sit down and have a fill of mine! There’s no hurry, we have all the day before us!” Then Bilbo sat down on a seat by his door, crossed his legs, and blew out a beautiful grey ring of smoke that sailed up into the air without breaking and floated away over The Hill.

“Very pretty!” said Gandalf. “But I have no time to blow smoke-rings this morning. I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it’s very difficult to find anyone.” “I should think so—in these parts! We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner! I can’t think what anybody sees in them,” said our Mr Baggins... and blew out another even bigger smoke-ring. Then he took out his morning letters, and began to read, pretending to take no more notice of the old man. He had decided that he was not quite his sort, and wanted him to go away. But the old man did not move. He stood leaning on his stick and gazing at the hobbit without saying anything, till Bilbo got quite uncomfortable and even a little cross.

“Good morning!” he said at last. “We don’t want any adventures here, thank you! You might try over The Hill or across The Water.” By this he meant that the conversation was at an end.

“What a lot of things you do use Good morning for!” said Gandalf. “Now you mean that you want to get rid of me, and that it won’t be good till I move off.”

“Sorry! I don’t want any adventures, thank you. Not today. Good morning! But please come to tea—any time you like! Why not tomorrow? Come tomorrow! Good-bye!” With that the hobbit turned and scuttled inside his round green door, and shut it as quickly as he dared, not to seem rude. Wizards after all are wizards.

“What on earth did I ask him to tea for!” he said to himself, as he went to the pantry. He had only just had breakfast, but he thought a cake or two and a drink of something would do him good after his fright.

Gandalf in the meantime was still standing outside the door, and laughing long but quietly. After a while he stepped up, and with the spike on his staff scratched a queer sign on the hobbit’s beautiful green front-door. Then he strode away, just about the time when Bilbo was finishing his second cake and beginning to think that he had escaped adventures very well.

Our second reading is from Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman

Listen! I will be honest with you,
I do not offer the old smooth prizes, but offer rough new prizes,
These are the days that must happen to you:
You shall not heap up what is call'd riches,
You shall scatter with lavish hand all that you earn or achieve,
You but arrive at the city to which you were destin'd, you hardly
settle yourself to satisfaction before you are call'd by an
irresistible call to depart,

Allons! after the great Companions, and to belong to them!
They too are on the road--they are the swift and majestic men—they are the greatest women,
Sailors of many a ship, walkers of many a mile of land,
Habitués of many distant countries, habitués of far-distant dwellings,
Journeyers with their womanhood, ample, unsurpass'd, content,
Journeyers with their own sublime old age of manhood or womanhood,
Old age, calm, expanded, broad with the haughty breadth of the universe,
Old age, flowing free with the delicious near-by freedom of death.

To gather the minds of men out of their brains as you encounter
them, to gather the love out of their hearts,
To take your lovers on the road with you,
for all that you leave them behind you,
To know the universe itself as a road,
as many roads,
as roads for traveling souls.

Allons! the road is before us!
It is safe--my own feet have tried it well
--be not detain'd!
Let the paper remain on the desk unwritten,
and the book on the shelf unopen'd!
Let the tools remain in the workshop! let the money remain unearn'd!
Let the school stand! mind not the cry of the teacher!
Let the preacher preach in his pulpit! let the lawyer plead in the
court, and the judge expound the law.

Camerado, I give you my hand!
I give you my love more precious than money,
I give you myself before preaching or law;
Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?

Sermon

The famous assignment –“What I did on my Summer Vacation” has attained mythic status. I can't recall actually ever doing such an assignment – but I trust that I did at some early and, likely, impressionable moment in my life. Only a couple of weeks ago Mark, Chava, and I were lucky enough to be flown out by my brother-in-law, Greg, to Seattle, from which we travelled to San Juan Island – about 90 minutes north of the city and in the middle of Puget Sound. We went there, on Greg's prodigious frequent flyer miles, to help our nephew Grisha and his wife Rosa, build their straw bale house. It was quite a distance to travel for the kids, the hale, the hearty, and the helpful to install flashing, move gravel, and remove concrete forms.

Above all, the kids were excited to move Grisha and Rosa's outhouse from one spot in the woods to a place closer to their new and temporary 16 by 16 foot cabin. Seth, our 13 year old nephew, was particularly eager to start the school year reporting that he had helped to move an outhouse. Certainly a glamorous project that would stimulate lively conversation of the sort that 10-14 year boys might really enjoy.

The dusty construction site had little to recommend it, but the setting – a verdant island in the Pacific Northwest, was breathtaking. Still, for us all and even for Seth, Aaron, Keira, Noah, Jenny, Chava, and Eric, the trip was not about the beauty of San Juan Island nor about the dramatic moving of the outhouse. It was about the working together as a supportive family. It was about mutual care and deep connection.

We spend so many years in school – twelve – sometimes more – and then we often raise kids whose schedules are determined by the school year. I don't know if other countries have this same sort of experience – but here – even the phrase “summer vacation” has a dream quality. Amazing things are supposed to happen on summer vacation – scaling the Alps, sailing the Atlantic, visiting the Mediterranean.

I admit that I found this stressful in high school. My parents scrimped every penny and borrowed quite a few to send me to a private girl's school. There I found myself among people who travelled far and wide every summer and most winter breaks while my family took vacations of a more modest scale – domestic and quiet – and counted ourselves lucky.

Summer vacation – it's as though we are supposed to wear ourselves down and then go away – wan, drawn, tarnished and tattered – travel to some surprising place from which, like the scarecrow, tin man, lion, Dorothy and even Toto, we return sleek, burnished, renewed and bouncing and recounting extraordinary adventures. It's a rather tall order.

We are travel-loving creatures. There is a sort of magic about getting out of our ordinary routine and an even greater magic about spanning distances and encountering new ways of life. Just before summer I shared with you a vignette from my semester abroad in college. It was a transforming time. I was nineteen. I still remember the experience of arriving in London – alone with my very heavy suitcases – the days before they all had wheels. What I remember most about that first day was the intensity of my experience – perhaps it was the spark of youth – but everything was so vivid – so clear – kind of hyper real. I checked myself into my bed and breakfast and walked out to explore Kennington. I felt terrifically alive and every detail stood out in clear relief – even the small rabbit that emerged from some shrubbery to welcome me to Kennington Gardens. I had a moment of crystalline insight as I contemplated the number of holes it really might take to fill Albert Hall.

I worked full time at the Bradford Teacher's College Library for four months – but I travelled a lot by coach and train – over long weekends – and almost entirely alone. It was there that I learned the pleasures of travel and of travel alone – pretty quiet pleasures. When travelling alone one does not want to point, exclaim, or speak aloud to one's travel companion – particularly when in a foreign land. And then, back in the mid 70's the reputation of the

United States was enough tarnished by our foreign policy in Vietnam without teenaged Americans wandering around, raving to themselves. But, I digress.

It was challenging – even a little traumatic – at first – learning to be a solo traveler. I managed to sidestep dining alone at restaurants by ordering Chinese take out in every town I visited. To this day, I consider myself something of an expert in the different varieties of short order Sweet And Sour. Finding a park to perch at or taking the food back to my bed and breakfast at the end of the day gave me plentiful time to absorb the days discoveries and to reflect and be changed by them.

It was a transforming experience – someday, maybe I'll tell you about Hans...

We are travel-loving creatures... it may not always be as vivid as the adventures we have when we're 19 – though sometimes with age and experience come even keener adventures... in any case, we human creatures love to find ourselves on the road, in new places, seeing new sights. Sometimes, though, we're like hobbits – just as Mr. Baggins said – sometimes “We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! I can't think what anybody sees in them.” Sometimes we're content to stay home inside our comfort zones with five meals a day. Most of the time we're not looking for the sort of adventure that Bilbo or Harry Potter or Odysseus had or even the sort of adventure that John Steinbeck had Travelling with his black standard poodle Charley as they crossed America in Rocinante – the converted truck/camper. We're usually just looking for new vistas, a way to refresh ourselves, to see how other people live, to swim in new waters. Or drive on the other side of the road.

But there is something magical about travel – as though, in taking us to new surroundings we discover something hidden in ourselves. Something covered, perhaps by habit and the need to belong – not to stand out too far. The movie Shirley Valentine – is about a middle aged woman – actually 8 years younger than I am – who leaves her lackluster life and goes off with a friend for a fortnight in Greece. The journey transforms her and brings out a life-loving woman that she never knew lived inside her. The movie helped to foster a whole movement of women travelling to discover themselves – who're often referred to as Shirley Valentines. The travel cure – that magically strips away layers of false self and reveals the vibrant an authentic self that we all know simply awaits our discovery.

I even found a book the other day on “the travel cure” for broken hearts, stalled lives, for nearly whatever ails you. The writer presents a test that will help you figure out what kind of a travel experience you need to fix whatever's wrong and then she offers a list of travel possibilities to fit that need.

The Unitarian sage, Ralph Waldo Emerson, used to travel – it was how he met John Muir and the great Redwoods of the West. He wrote: The antidotes against egotism, are, the range and variety of attractions, as gained by acquaintance with the world, with men of merit, with classes of society, with travel, with eminent persons, and with the high resources of philosophy, art, and religion: books, travel, society, solitude. “ Mark Twain said something quite similar sometime later: “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.”

Twain and Emerson were both pointing to a hunger for the life that maketh all things new. Let us pause for a moment in sermonizing and sing together hymn #12.

When half their house was destroyed by fire, Emerson's wife, Lydian, sent Waldo on the road for a few months while she oversaw the renovations. Standing by his favorite rocking chair in the parlor at his home in Concord I got the definite sense that he like to be planted just there. In fact, Emerson was not a fan of travel – and wrote about his dislike of it in his essays.

He had some prejudices that were symptomatic of his time. He believed in the newness of American thought and believed that we shouldn't get dragged down by veneration for Europe or reverence for ancient ideas. In *Self-Reliance* he wrote: "It is for want of self-culture that the superstition of Travelling, whose idols are Italy, England, Egypt, retains its fascination for all educated Americans. He who travels to be amused, or to get somewhat which he does not carry, travels away from himself, and grows old even in youth among old things." Of course he said that almost 200 years ago – so now he is old news – perhaps today we have a somewhat higher estimation of the culture, art, history of the past – we want to learn from it, respect and preserve some of it and to grow beyond it. But it was a force that Emerson was certain would erode the fresh American character. He wrote further:

"I think, there is a restlessness in our people, which argues want of character. All educated Americans, first or last, go to Europe; ...Can we never extract this tape-worm of Europe from the brain of our countrymen? He that does not fill a place at home, cannot abroad. ... You do not think you will find anything there, which you have not seen at home? What is true anywhere is true everywhere. And let him go where he will, he can only find so much beauty or worth as he carries."

More than 100 years later John Steinbeck took his famous trip with his standard poodle, Charley and felt that same restlessness -- but his response to it was different from Emerson's. He wrote: "Could it be that Americans are a restless people, a mobile people, never satisfied with where they are as a matter of selection? The pioneers, the immigrants who people the continent, were the restless ones in Europe. The steady rooted ones stayed home and are still there."

I agree with Steinbeck and Emerson – there's a restlessness in our spirits – and we, too often, indulge it with distractions that only make the restlessness worse.

I love travel – but I think that it is, in fact, a metaphor that we act out – sometimes to our gain and sometimes to our loss. I think that we have a restlessness in our inner beings – a hunger for renewal, for discovery, for something that will stir and awaken the soul. It is the exterior journey that can parallel or point to the inner journey –the soul's journey – the human journey for wholeness and understanding. This isn't same as the home bound philosophy of Emerson – that was a person pointed inward only – living an ideal of utter self reliance and self enlightenment. Travel reminds us of is that we are not self- reliant – we are interdependent. I think back to my semester in England – what really changed me was what happened after all the students left the college and I was in a dormitory with around 350 rooms and only two other people. I explored my inner world and found strength and grounding I had never had before. It came to me and remained with me – an indelible souvenir of my journey both inward and toward adulthood. It wasn't the travel that changed me – it was the time reflecting on relationships and life that I was given – quite incidentally. We are mutually reliant and our insights and any peace we hope to attain will come not only from our own minds and experiences – but from our interactions with the world and all that constitutes the world. But I roll with Emerson because, while I think that travel is grand, the truly profound journeys are right here – within us and among us. We can travel the world over – and encounter great wonders – but none will be of any real value to us until we have encountered the wonders within us and between us. The landscape of the self is a rugged one – honestly it is full of bear traps, rocky shoals, twisting paths – it's where the wild things are. But it's a landscape that summons us – we just have to stop long enough to heed the summons. If the divine speaks in the world at all it speaks through us – but only if we are listening to our souls. But soul does not exist alone. Decartes said "I think therefore I am" but I wish that he had been more accurate "I respond in relationship to the world, therefore we are, together."

So I've had my study leave, time to reflect over the summer – and I've shared some of the summer vacations of two of my kids. But I'm eager to be here – to be back in this place that promises such great – the very greatest - adventure. The other day I was reading a guidebook for travelers to Chicago. It's good to live in a world class city. But when I walk into this place I know that I am living in a world class religious community – it only remains to each of us to explore it like avid travelers – with that level of attention – yet, not passing through – but moving more deeply into this place that has been shaped by many hearts and hands. In this place, like travelers and those at home -- both – we are both out of our ordinary space and in it at the same time. In this place, we encounter the familiar and the new, ourselves and one another, the interior and exterior worlds, the comfort of compassionate presence and the challenge to stretch and grow. In this place – this congregation we can find habit and tradition and we can also be moved beyond habit into new ways of being. It is better than summer vacation – more renewing, more nourishing, more accessible. In this place what matters about summer time – or any time -- is not so much where or even if we went – but how we were touched, how we were shaken, how we were changed by what we experienced. What I did on my summer vacation – I thought about this place and you and our work and life together and I felt my soul refresh.

Here we know that what we are restless for is not a travel cure – for what ails us – but a little bit of soul. Perhaps a lot of soul...

Here's a core belief of my own – that we bark up trees, follow false paths, we engage in many activities yearning for our souls – our inner beings to be stirred and awakened. I ask you to join me – to join together – let us be awakened – together – to experience the transcendent richness that lives in the heart of everything. let us kindle a little bit of soul and see if that is not the greatest journey – at the very least it will put you right.