

"Your Place or Mine?"
Reverend Alison Hyder

December 2, 2007

The Universalist Meeting House of Provincetown

Opening Words: from Rev. Martha Munson

We come together:

We ... individuals,
 women, children, men, young, old; those new to this congregation,
 and those who have been here many times before.

Come ... choosing to be here, making the effort,
 traveling the distance, long or short.

Together ... becoming more than we are,
 united for this time of worship,
 to put aside our solitude.

We Come Together.

PRAYER by Rev. Jerry Wright

Let us join together in collective solitude, considering our private experience:

Each of us has had successes this week - some larger, some smaller.
Each of us, also, has had moments we would change, if we could.

We have not always supported our important values.
Some of our values, we are re-evaluating, reordering, reaffirming or discarding.
Our values are ours. They have a history, a promise or a threat. But they are ours.

The week ahead promises new opportunities and implies new demands - but just for now, we are here,
centering, breathing, being, considering - seeking insight.

May we find - each of us - that for which we have come. Amen.

READING: from "The Piano the Truck and the Canyon" by Jane Rzepka, senior minister, Church of the
Larger Fellowship, in *Quest*, July-Aug 2005

I never saw the piano or the truck. Just the cliff.

George and Evelyn Frey built a guest lodge in the canyon in 1925. It's hard to imagine why they chose a spot on the floor of Frijoles Canyon, given that the only way down is a steep and narrow trail a mile and a half down from the canyon rim. Hardly a tourist thoroughfare.

As if the challenge of the remote location weren't enough, evidently running a guest lodge in the 1920s required (at least in the minds and hearts of George and Evelyn) a piano and a truck. So piece by piece they hauled a Dodge pickup down the little trail, and similarly, a piano.

George and Evelyn Frey, late of Bandelier, New Mexico, lived lives of industrious folly, human ambition, splendid success. That was their recipe for living life. What's yours?

SERMON: "Your Place or Mine?" Rev. Alison Hyder

I own two pianos.

I took piano lessons when I was 5. And then I put a stop to it. My brother's lessons lasted just a little longer; still, we had a baby grand piano in our small rowhouse throughout my childhood. It was a perfect surface for doing jigsaw puzzles, and it served me as a secret cave. I tried taking piano lessons as an adult, but they didn't take. The music sounds so much better in my mind.

But as I was preparing to move from Palmer here to Truro I acquired an upright piano from one of the members there. I thought I could slide it from the truck ramp right into my new living room, but everything went wrong that day and it got as far as my garage. And there it has been ever since, home to generations of grateful mice. (Just like the Dr. Doolittle stories my father read to us). The other piano is actually in my house. It belonged to my great-aunt Nell and shows all the evidence of her social life in ash marks, rings, and discoloration. I can imagine her friends gathered round the piano as someone played the latest hit by Gershwin or Vincent Youmans. Aunt Nell was a flapper. She smoked like a fiend and I adored her.

My pianos connect me to the past and they widen my possibilities. Music enhances and extends friendships and encourages community. All you need is a piano or a guitar - or just a good tune - and soon everyone joins in. And the world is a better place.

George and Evelyn Frey built their guest house, complete with piano, in a remote New Mexico canyon amid ancient cliffs and wild, scrubby land. They found a raw but intricate beauty in the balance of nature and human ideals, and they offered it all up to strangers and friends. They created their own form of heaven, piece by piece.

My colleague, Jane Rzepka, believes that one key to a satisfying life is to "know what your heaven looks like." Mine, I can assure you, does not include celestial harpists, chosen people or anticipatory virgins. Instead, it has more to do with oneness, both within and with the world, in all its colors, sounds, and manifestations. My heaven is a dynamic web; it includes cats and doo-wop and Jane Austen and love in changing patterns of joy.

What is yours? Maybe heaven includes a warm and crowded kitchen, salt marshes, a morning run, intimate moments with your lifetime love, a child's sticky hug. It could be this room right here, filled with your dearest friends, a heaven of comfort, and purpose, and aspiration. It's the memory of absent souls, who live on in our hearts and habits.

"When we want to know how best to live," writes Jane, "I think it helps to know what heaven could look like."

The ancient Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*, describes one journey toward heaven. Its wisdom was incorporated into the sacred text of the *Bhagavad-Gita Gait*.

The great king Yudhisthira had ruled over the Pandava people for many years, and, among his many achievements had waged a successful war against the forces of evil. It was time for him to withdraw from the world, and to enter the Celestial City of the Immortals. King Yudhisthira set off on the long journey into the northern mountains, along with his four brothers and his beloved wife Drapaudi. They were soon joined on their journey by a small, ill-kempt stray dog.

The journey was hard. They tired. And in the course of the journey first one brother and then another, then the third and then the fourth, fell, exhausted, and died. Unable to do anything for them, Yudhisthira and Drapaudi continued on the journey, followed by the dog. Eventually Drapaudi, too, fell by the wayside and died. With utmost sadness, Yudhisthira turned and continued, the dog faithfully keeping pace.

At last Yudhisthira and the dog reached the gates of the Celestial City, home of the Immortals. Yudhisthira bowed humbly and asked to be admitted. The great sky God Indra arrived to meet Yudhisthira and to welcome him to heaven.

But then Yudhisthira said that without his beloved wife and his four brothers, he did not have the heart to enter. Indra replied that these loved ones were already in Heaven, they had come before him.

This lifted Yudhisthira's heart, but he had one more request. "This dog has faithfully accompanied me on this long journey, never left my side. I cannot leave him now outside heaven's gate. My heart is full of love for him."

Indra shook his head. The earth quaked. "You, Yudhisthira, through your goodness and courage, and by enduring this long and difficult journey, have earned your way into heaven. But you cannot bring a dog into heaven. A dog would pollute the Celestial City. Leave the dog behind, Yudhisthira. It is no sin."

"But where would he go? He has given up the pleasures of the earth to be my companion. I cannot desert him now." Yudhisthira said, and he turned to leave.

Indra asked, astonished, "You would abandon heaven just for the sake of a dog?" Yudhisthira declared that long ago he had vowed never to turn his back on anyone needing his protection and help. "And so," he concluded, "I will not abandon my loyal friend."

Yudhisthira turned from heaven's gate and began to walk away.

At that moment a remarkable thing happened. The faithful dog was transformed into the god Dharma, the god of righteousness and justice. And Indra declared, "You are a good man, Yudhisthira. You have shown loyalty and love to a small, faithful dog and compassion for all creatures, ready to renounce for yourself all the rewards of heaven for this humble dog's sake. You shall be honored in heaven!"

And so Yudhisthira entered heaven and was reunited with his wife and with brothers to enjoy eternal happiness.

For Yudhisthira, there could be no heaven without the dog. And I am right there with him. I bet a lot of us can't imagine paradise without our beloved pets, and all the animals that make the earth so very sacred and complete.

But there is another lesson here. It's an example of integrity and self-respect. For Yudhisthira refuses to stifle or abandon any part of his own nature. He knows that he can only experience heaven through the lens of his own values and principles. On earth, he prized compassion and loyalty and courage. He must bring these qualities to paradise too. Heaven isn't self-denial. It is being fully and wholly alive.

We all have traces of patience, generosity, shame, vanity and faith, a mix of positive and harmful traits that shape our attitudes and actions. We know which ones make us remorseful and blue. They are the traits that separate us from other people and deny the bonds of love for our own version of pride. Each one of us can choose who we will be, and which of our qualities we will nurture and display. We do it all the time. And it's a pretty good indication of what we truly value in life ... or perhaps, what we think we deserve.

There is no doubt that we can make our own hell. The pit of self-loathing is filled with addiction, violence, and hatred. It is easy to succumb to a cycle of shame. But it is possible to affirm our ugly truths.

Harry Crews tried to be a writer, but all of his work was rejected. One night he was sitting at the typewriter, surrounded by manuscripts even he knew were bad, when he had a revelation:

For many and complicated reasons, circumstances had collaborated to make me ashamed that I was a tenant farmer's son. As weak and warped as it is, and as difficult as it is even now to admit it, I was so humiliated by the fact that I was from the edge of the Okefenokee Swamp in the worst hookworm and rickets part of Georgia I could not bear to think of it, and worse to believe it. Everything I had written had been out of a fear and loathing for what I was and who I was. It was all out of an effort to pretend otherwise. I believe to this day, and will always believe, that in that moment I literally saved my life, because the next thought - and it was more than a thought, it was a dead-solid conviction - was that all I had going for me in the world or would ever have was that swamp, all those goddamn mules, all those screwworms that I'd dug out of pigs and all the other beautiful and dreadful and sorry circumstances that had made me the Grit I am and will always be. Once I realized that the way I saw the world and man's condition in it would always be exactly and inevitably shaped by everything which up to that moment had only shamed me, once I realized that, I was home free.

Crews learned to write out of his sorry background and translated his shame into strength. That's not to say it solved all his problems - he still had to learn how he wanted to live, and what healthy, deliberate choices looked like. But at least he recognized his own part in the torture. He took his own hand off of the blade.

We all blame ourselves for circumstances. Our parents' alcoholism or divorce, accidents, poverty, being assaulted, being single, catching a cold. But we seldom take responsibility for the one thing we can change: our attitudes in life. We are the only ones who can decide to forgive somebody, to count our blessings or risk our hearts and act the fool. Maybe we need to visualize heaven before we can ever hope to get there. We have to build it, step by step.

I think I lay claim to a kind of limbo. After all, the Catholic Church isn't using it anymore, and it seems to describe my normal state of being, when I let myself go and indulge in indolence, pettiness, or greed. People are flawed. We're selfish and rebellious and we like our vices. So how good do we have to be?

Yudhisthira's story gives us clues. Heaven isn't puffy clouds or white light or even Beech Forest. It's not an environment, or even an experience. I think that maybe heaven is character. It's the virtues and principles that we embody, and who we become that makes us feel damned or divine. The doctrines of God's judgment have it skewed. Heaven is not a reward for righteousness. It is simply a natural result of strong virtues. Character is salvation.

For many people, Provincetown is a kind of paradise, where they can be themselves and act out their desires. Some of us moved here for that reason, and it has served us well. We love this town and value its traditions, its culture of creativity, and the friendly camaraderie of community life. It is a special place, an important place.

But for it to be anything like heaven, we need a vision. We have to decide what that would look like, and how we have to live. Where exactly do we fit in, as individuals and as a religious community?

The question is complicated by our own differences. We gather in spiritual quest, while our ideals often differ. We have different styles and tastes, and a complexity of beliefs mirrored in individual practices. Sometimes, our needs conflict. We may be able to talk them through and reach a good solution. More often, we simply swallow our disappointment in the name of peace, but we feel resentful and sad. Envy can lead to criticism, and we may poison souls with snide gossip and discontent. We ignore our responsibility to other members. And we are all one step further from the heaven we seek.

We don't need perfection. Affection can overcome annoyance. For the most part we are flexible and mature enough to weather the problems and forgive the trespasses and mistakes. What is heaven, after all, without compassion and understanding? We are a warm and fun and caring community, a place where Chester and so many others have found a family. We blend our songs with harmony and flair. Our merits are many and real.

Still, we must strive. We owe *ourselves* our very best stab at a virtuous, principled life. We each deserve some self-respect and the challenge of a higher purpose - like discipline or justice, or hauling a piano down a cliff. Perhaps we're served most when we think about others.

Heaven is within our grasp. It is living at its best.

CLOSING WORDS by Joseph Albers: "My earth serves also others. My world is mine alone."