

CALLED TO COURAGE

**A sermon given in the 10 -part 'What We Believe' series by
The Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at UU Wellesley Hills on
Sunday, December 9th, 2018**

Not far from here is Walden Pond, made famous by Transcendentalist author Henry David Thoreau, who in the nineteenth century published a memoir of his years living in a cabin there. The original title of the work was Walden, or: Life in the Woods. "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately," Thoreau wrote, "to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach..." The lessons he learned have since been taught to generations of Americans, who have studied his writing closely. Walden is no longer deep in the woods, though, but within the town limits of Concord, a suburb of Boston much like this one. The pond is part of a state park now, and a well-trafficked tourist destination. Today tourists go hoping to see what Thoreau saw there.

With good reason, Thoreau makes every possible list of renowned Unitarians - his name appears on T-shirt and mugs, right alongside his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson's. Thoreau is famous as a nature writer, yes, but positively paradigmatic as a spiritual seeker. In his ten-point catalogue of what we Unitarian Universalists believe, the Rev. David O. Rankin lifts up "the never-ending search for Truth. If the mind and heart are truly free and open," Rankin maintains, "the revelations that appear to the human spirit are infinitely numerous, eternally fruitful, and wondrously exciting." They may also be

profoundly unsettling, both literally and figuratively. Such a search may take us away from much that is familiar.

These days, Americans are hyper-mobile. We may move for job opportunities or schooling, or perhaps to follow adult children who have moved across the country, or a future spouse. People go west or south for health reasons, or because of the weather. We roam outside Eastern Massachusetts and across an entire continent, quite deliberately pursuing a certain kind of life, one that feels true to us, personally fulfilling and perhaps spiritually resonant. We do not all require solitary woods, but I think most of us want to discover someplace where we can find an existence that feels authentic and meaningful. We uproot ourselves fairly frequently, but often are not prepared for the consequences of our freedom.

In her recent book Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone, Dr. Brene Brown, a social work professor, respected researcher, and popular speaker, observes that our country is currently confronting a spiritual crisis of startling magnitude, one she dubs “High Lonesome”. She borrows that term from the bluegrass musical tradition that arose originally from the wilds of Kentucky. “The world feels high lonesome and heartbroken to me right now. We’ve sorted ourselves into factions based on our politics and ideology,” Dr. Brown observes. “We’ve turned away from one another... We’re lonely and untethered. And scared.” Mostly, we are fearful and distrustful of one another.

When Americans of means survey their range of options, they are immediately attracted to those social settings that mirror their

preferences and make them most comfortable. To an extent almost unprecedented before, Dr. Brown reports, we are sorted into like-minded groups that have a low tolerance for dissent and little appreciation for internal diversity. We reside in blue states like Massachusetts or in red states like Kentucky, with only a handful of so-called purple states between, and we have boundaries firmly drawn around our kind and not our kind, in our minds as well as on our maps. Oddly, this tendency to sort ourselves out has resulted in distressing levels of loneliness. We grow anxious about being in the wrong place; we wonder if we are with the right people, after all. We routinely question if we are actually fitting in, whether we should stay or go, and if we have found a home for ourselves at long last.

According to Dr. Brown, “True belonging has no bunkers. We have to step out from behind the barricades of self preservation and brave the wild” of our own uncertainty. We have to believe that we belong where we are simply because we are there — when that has become a controversial proposition, and very plainly not one that our larger consumerist culture would endorse. Our collective sense of belonging has gotten compromised. Part of what happens in “High Lonesome” bluegrass is that people vocalize their pain and alienation to one another. They hear one another’s cries and they know what the distress that they signal. “High Lonesome can be a beautiful and powerful place,” Dr. Brown contends, provided that we perk up our ears and listen for one another.

In nearly all the spiritual traditions of the world, the language of lost and found is used descriptively and universally. In our Story for All Ages this morning, for instance, we heard that human search for lost

divinity described in near-cosmic terms. Whenever we feel completely lost, we experience a sort of existential dread. So when the Rev. Rankin asserts that we UUs believe in “the never-ending search for Truth”, I have my doubts about that. Most of us, I suspect, would like very much to have sought out a singular capital-T truth and found it in short order and rather conveniently nearby - at least, that’s long been my personal preference. We’re not naturally inclined toward endless odysseys, no matter how edifying and educational they might prove to be.

Several of you have shared with me gratitude and relief alike at having found your way to a faith community like UU Wellesley Hills, whether it was just a few months or several years or even decades ago. You plan to stay here a while. I’m glad! You also want it to remain familiar and comfortable and recognizable, and I can certainly understand why. But this is a space that asks us to keep “mind and free truly free and open”, alert to “the revelations that appear” to us, both individually and communally. It calls us to be courageous. In her research, Dr. Brown came across a television interview with the late Poet Laureate Maya Angelou, in which she told her interviewer: “You are only free when you realize that you belong no place - you belong every place - no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great.” Such a realization takes quite a while; it’s usually a long time coming.

Yet what this underscores is a supremely human paradox that we do not belong to places, nor do they belong to us, but rather, we belong to one another. That cabin by the banks of Walden where Thoreau resided was owned by his good friend Emerson, and often he would walk into town to dine with Emerson in his Concord home. Part of

what made Thoreau's philosophical exploration - his adventure in living - possible was being so securely tethered in relationship. His woods were not as wild as they appeared in the pages of his book. I say this not as cynical disclosure - I am devoted to Thoreau: I have read his collected works; I have walked Walden Pond myself; last year, I celebrated Thoreau's 200th birthday at a library exhibit with old friends. But he was well served by "the essential facts" of his own life, by an established network of strong social supports. Those are sorely lacking for many Americans now.

Dr. Brown notes that "in our hearts we want to believe that despite our differences and despite the need to brave the wilderness, we don't always have to walk alone." It's almost impossible to survive entirely on our own and we are understandably reluctant to attempt that. Our insecurity can easily compel our us to fit in, but when we fit in, we have an uneasy awareness that we do not really belong. "Belonging is being accepted for being you," Dr. Brown explains. "Fitting in is being accepted for being like everyone else." In these polarized times, we claim our spot in the in group by taking care not to be in the out group, whether that's politically or socially or religiously defined. We worry about being cast away - and we are given grounds for that, in our schools and workplaces as well as in our families and communities and online chats.

The trends are increasingly conformist, Dr. Brown observes, with people "following suit, bunkering up, and being safe" within tightly drawn confines. But the spiritual costs are considerable and our shared humanity feels undermined when we are discouraged from reverencing what we hold in common with our neighbors. As Dr.

Brown points out, “real connection and real empathy require meeting real people in a real space in real time.” Our desire for ongoing connection calls us to this Sanctuary Sunday after Sunday. Just such routine interactions embolden us to reach out to others and try to remedy “the spiritual crisis of disconnection” that we presently face.

Because we “find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone”, Dr. Brown declares, we need to be able to alternate our stance even as we stay put. Especially within those groups where we aligned, we need permission to express our dissent without forfeiting our role in the collective. “When all that binds us is what we believe rather than who we are,” she argues, “changing our minds or challenging the collective ideology is risky.” We do not develop the brave habits we need to live with integrity and speak our small-t truths, plural. We are subtly curtail our curiosity about others and ourselves. We may do that most quickly in the places dearest to us - in our circle of friends, for instance, or in our faith community.

In her latest book, Dr. Brown encourages us to reconsider our requirements around what has been called “emotional safety”, noting it often gets conflated with comfort and certainty, both of which can provide us a false sense of security. While obviously, no one should tolerate emotional abuse, if we want to claim our belonging, we have to allow ourselves to be vulnerable and assume some risk. We have to communicate where and how we have been hurt in relation to others in order to strengthen our potential for connection. We have to be willing to be wronged and also to admit when we ourselves have been wrong.

If we believe that “[t]rue belonging is a spiritual practice”, as Braving the Wilderness tells us, we UUUs need to recognize that “the never-ending search for Truth” is a key component of that. When we claim that “the revelations that appear to the human spirit are infinitely numerous”, we acknowledge that they count more than just our own, and the revelations are indeed continuous. We must take care we do not shore up our own sense of belonging with an insistence that others do not. In our divisive political climate, Americans are far too quick to discount and demean each other.

By Dr. Brown’s definition, “spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us... grounded in love and compassion.” We can forget our connection - we can vehemently deny our connection - but we cannot sever it. Blue states are connected to red states and the stray purple ones, too. Countries are connected across borders and all their citizens share a basic humanity. Continents share a globe, and whatever pollution they generate affects us all. As current events so clearly demonstrate, military conflicts are never really localized or confined, but have implications that extend far beyond the front lines. We regularly read about them above the fold our newspapers.

High Lonesome music originated began when soldiers were returning from war, when they were making their way home to Kentucky and announcing themselves from the hills. I imagine that many of them harbored doubts about whether they belonged there any longer and that part of what assured them was that others had those same doubts. They were weary from fighting. In place of battle cries, they sounded lamentations. We have to be able to hear one another’s pain

as a cry for connection. We are called to be courageous in reaching across divides, even if the people we reach toward are total strangers.

All of us are strangers in various times and places in our lives. We have yearned to belong and simultaneously had misgivings that we ever would. We need to make our peace with that poet's paradox: "you belong no place - you belong every place - no place at all" as we make our way through the wilds of our days, even here in suburban Boston, even among the crowds. Walden was a wonderful place for Thoreau, but it was never his permanent address. It was a spot borrowed from a fellow spiritual seeker. For a while, it allowed him to belong solely to himself. That was merely an interlude, however - after he found precious insights into what was "sublime" and what claimed his ultimate loyalties, Thoreau returned to the civilization he knew, flawed and fractious as it was, and sought out fresh applications of those in his relations with others. Our religious task is not so different from his. Today, of course, Thoreau and Walden belong to the world. Then again, so do you.

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