



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Deep Roots and Wide Wings”

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Centering Thoughts:

“Feet on the ground, head in the sky, it’s ok, I know nothing’s wrong.” Talking Heads

“A tree with strong roots laughs at storms.” Malay Proverb

“If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.” Rene Descartes

Reflection by Molly Williams

I have lived an unusually nomadic life. When I do the math, I can count almost as many places that I’ve called “home” as I can count years of age. To be clear, picking up and moving to a new house or city is not necessarily an annual event (with the exception of my college years, when that was just kind of the deal). My family moved around a lot when I was a kid, because my dad managed hotels, and he got so good at it that the company would send him to new places to train other managers. For two years, we lived on the Caribbean island of St. Martin, and while we waited for the construction company to finish building our apartment—which they never did—we traveled through seven different houses. Before and after that, though, we typically stayed in one place for at least two-three years at a time.

On the score of giving their kids wings, my parents passed with flying colors (pun intended); with the roots, not so much. My sister and I became highly adaptable, and developed a confidence that was rare among our peer group. We learned how to make lasting friendships, because we often had to keep them up across long distances. Through all of this moving, we not only built a hefty toolkit of practical life skills, we also learned to embrace major life changes, that they are not to be feared, but rather that it is very possible to move through them with grace and humor.

To some of you, these frequent transitions might seem terrifying, or at least deeply unsettling. But for much of my upbringing, I didn’t know anything different. I thought that everyone changed houses—or even cities—every few years, and I was ignorant of the toll that this constant uprooting can take. Instead, I saw each move as a new adventure, as a chance to reinvent myself, and I looked forward to figuring out a new place and meeting new people. And when I got old enough to decide for myself where to live, I kept repeating the pattern. I couldn’t help it—it was in my nature to spread my wings, flex my moving muscles, and rush headlong into something different every three to four years.

And then, just like Dr. Seuss warns in *Oh, The Places You’ll Go!*, I hit a slump. I had tried to move back to Seattle, where I had come into my own as an adult, but it wasn’t working out. This was the first time in my whole life that putting all of my best intentions and brightest hopes behind a move didn’t make it go. I kept pushing towards this goal, without realizing that it wasn’t working because something in my very nature had begun to shift. In part, I had made this move in response to a subconscious desire to put down roots; I loved Seattle, and somewhere deep down I felt that I had left a healthy enough root stock there to replant myself. But it just wasn’t so. And so I moved in with my parents for a time while I repaired my battered wings.

While I was there, I explored the potential of digging my roots deeper into the Maine soil. My dad had moved on from managing hotels and built a successful catering and event planning business in Portland. He needed my particular skills to help expand the business to the next level, and I needed an

active role to play, something that would restore my confidence. He asked me to work with him for a year, and to consider taking on the business in the long run. But as the months marched on, I became more certain that this was also not the home in which my roots could take hold. Fortunately, my dad is an incredibly supportive man who believes in my potential, and who would never dream of clipping my wings. While we both had some sadness about not keeping this business in the family, he encouraged me, as he always has, to seek fulfillment wherever I wanted to go.

I was reluctant to take to my wings again, with these two recent moving strikes on my record. During my time in Maine I had done some serious personal exploration, and had come to realize that what I truly wanted was a more root-based life. I set new intentions that aligned with what that might look like, and did some recon missions to scout potential home bases. I found Athens, Georgia, and something about it just felt like the right fit. I put my faith in intuition—perhaps the trustiest compass I’ve ever relied on—packed my car, and flew South. And I’ve never felt happier, or more at home.

Within a week of arriving in Athens, I found UUFA. Now, my spiritual development has been almost as all over the map and complicated as my residence history. I felt strongly that I needed to find a community to belong to, and to grow within, in my new home. I didn’t expect that I would find such a beloved community as this one—I didn’t know such a place existed, or at least I had never found one in all my travels. I’m so grateful to y’all for taking me in, and I am proud to share in our fellowship.

You’ll have to bear with me for the conclusion here. I love music, so much so that I’m sure it’s embedded in the fiber of my very being. I often frame moments or events in my life in terms of the song (or album) that feels particularly relevant for the occasion; so naturally this reflection comes with a soundtrack. Earlier this week, I went to see the Talking Heads concert video *Stop Making Sense* at Cine. It features a performance of one of my favorite songs, “This Must Be the Place.” (I even lifted a lyric for one of the quotes featured in this week’s Order of Service.) In the song, David Byrne sings “Home is where I want to be but I guess I’m already there / I come home, she lifted up her wings / I guess that this must be the place.” I kept returning to that song as I looked forward to this service, and while pretty much all of the lyrics apply to this theme of roots and wings, I find this to be the most relevant passage.

The image of finding your home in the company of another, and with that person literally taking you under their wing, and that being exactly where you are meant to be, it resonates so strongly for me at this particular moment. But I also take comfort in the idea that you can find your home beneath a wing, that sometimes home is transportable, something you take with you wherever you go. Don’t worry—I have no intention of leaving Athens—and I’ve fully embraced the change in my nature from winged to rooted. Just as I can’t deny the significant role that wings have played in shaping my personal evolution, I also can’t deny the yearning now to plant and nourish roots that complement those wings.

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to share with you today these reflections. I look forward to hearing from you in the near future about your own sense of how wide your wings span, or how deep your roots reach.

Reflection: Practical Religion by Robert (Chase) White

Our religion will not survive without attracting more people like myself, by which I don’t mean young people, or Nones, but practical people. Today I’m going to look into the root of what makes religion relevant so that we can better understand and frame our appeal to those who love life and would share their love of life, who are looking for the best way; to those who, like myself before I came to this fellowship, don’t see religion as the best way.

First, let’s remember what poet and painter William Blake said: “Religion is born of poetry.” Religion is born of poetry. This idea is the foundation of my understanding of what religion offers. As in poetry, it is the FORMAT of the church that has lasted. The church as a kind of organization has proven itself an effective means of expression. The values within the church or ideas within the poem can be found elsewhere. Before I came to this fellowship I valued the Seven Principles no less than I do now. What has changed since I joined this fellowship is the way I live, or express, these values. No one here, I imagine, can quote Petrarch, yet most of us do know what a sonnet is: a FORM of poetry that Petrarch perfected. The substance of sonnets since his time has changed, as have the values espoused in churches, but the gathering of people, regularly, to reinforce, explore, and express their values, remains. That people are looking for the best way to live their values remains.

The church’s form distinguishes it from other organizations. Religion can be, and if it is to remain

relevant should be, where what is good, that is, what we value, and what is beautiful, that is, what is real, are reconciled. I attend this fellowship because it hosts the crossroads of my interest: music and social justice work (the beautiful and the good). Considering both, it is possible here that the exploration of one subject will be at no expense to another; in a word, the medicine of religion is holistic. Many American churches have forgotten one or the other. Forgetting the value of what is real, or what is beautiful, they shun new scientific discoveries which could assist them in their efforts to do what is good. Forgetting the value of the good, or what they can do, they make no effort to change what can be changed, assuming that the current way is God's will. Many of us here have attended such churches and many people outside of this fellowship who might enjoy membership here know religion only by these churches—that preach their values more than they practice them, so when we promote ourselves, and we should promote ourselves if we believe we have an effective method of making change, let us promote how we practice; the values we hold won't need telling if they're apparent in our work.

Finally, this talk is meant not as a period, but as a conduit, to new ideas, and even new values; so could our fellowship be, a conduit, so will the church be that attracts members who aren't interested in stagnation, but want to know more about the world by listening to other's experiences and the discoveries of science, members who aren't interested in being pacified but want to know what they can do to help, members who are looking for a full-bodied, or holistic, approach to pursuing what they are interested in. We will welcome more people like me into this fellowship not by holding fast to our values, which are the cultural roots of Unitarian Universalism, and will change as we change, but by remembering the roots of the church itself.

If this fellowship is to fly, it will fly on the momentum of those that use this form, this way, the way of the church, a gathering place, a safe space for ideas and questions, and zeal, things that don't fit into mainstream culture or even mainstream religion, which has forgotten its roots and would rather get by on the glue of culture than trust human nature to find the best way of living their values. This church will fly on the momentum of, not the young only, or the Nones only, but those from any walk of life, that love life, and who are practical, and being practical, will find the most effective way to share their love. It could be this way.

Reflection from a “Southern Belle” by Rebecca Vander Plaats

“I'm goin' down the stairs.” This is the first thing my father taught me to say—over and over. “I'm goin' down the stairs.” To him, this phrase was the best way to teach me how to speak like a Southern belle. I grew up in conservative Marietta, Georgia, with Newt Gingrich as my representative and this phrase in my head.

I learned what women were supposed to aspire to by watching *Gone with the Wind* and observing the moms in my upper-middle-class swim-tennis community. I knew that Southern belles were supposed to be soft-spoken, well mannered, pleasant, and beautiful. The emphasis was on presentation, what people could perceive about you from the outside. It made perfect sense, then, that my twin sister and I aspired to be supermodels when we were in middle school and high school—a goal that was fully supported by our conservative parents. Little did our parents know, however, that this pursuit would lead us to question everything about our roots and inspire us to spread our wings.

Modeling introduced us to a whole new world of people and possibilities. We would drive to Atlanta to places like Piedmont Park in Midtown and the old, rundown mill houses in Cabbagetown for photo shoots, where we encountered artists, gay people, and (gasp!) liberals. Until I was 14, I had no idea you could be all of those things AND be a Southerner. I felt like a secret had been shared with me, like I had been given the password to enter a new life—and I was thrilled.

Yet these new possibilities, this new reality, came with questions. I knew that the artists and gay people and liberals I was meeting were considered “alternative.” But why did that have to be? The Rodney King trial and Los Angeles riots were also happening around this time, and my experiences in Atlanta were helping me to see the realities of African Americans in our country through a new lens as well. As I became more aware of current events, long-held prejudices, and ongoing injustices, I became more disillusioned with my Southern roots—with the racism, classism, and sexism that I had been dimly aware of in my childhood but that were becoming more and more obvious to me.

When I came to Athens for college, I found a town full of “alternative” Southerners like the ones I

had met in Atlanta. I felt more at home here than I had ever felt in Marietta. This version of the South was more welcoming and positive than what I had known before, and exploring this new location inspired me to explore still more places. I spent a semester living in Spain during college, and for my master's program, I spent a year in Vermont and seven months in Florida before returning to Athens. Later, I moved to Indiana, just outside of Chicago, for two years to live with Ryan Vander Plaats, who is now my husband.

I was self-conscious as a native Southerner in these locations, worrying that people would assume I was racist, classist, and sexist because of my roots. And, in fact, I discovered a couple of times while living away from the South that I *was* more racist, classist, and sexist than I realized. Being in new situations and reflecting on my responses to them brought some tough self-awareness. But I also found these social ills existed everywhere I went outside of the South.

In my master's program in Vermont, I was surrounded by people who were more socially and environmentally conscious than I had ever known. And yet, while I was there, teenagers in the small town surrounding our school hung a black doll in effigy. We were in Southern Vermont, and a group of high school students wanted to celebrate their Southern Vermontness by doing something they thought true Southerners would do. In Indiana, I heard the “n” word in casual conversation among the conservative Christian community I was temporarily part of *way* more often than I ever heard it when I lived in the South. Examples of classism and sexism abounded in Spain, Vermont, Florida, and Indiana as well. On one hand, it was disheartening to find this, but on the other hand, it helped me see the South in a new light.

There were even times when I appreciated being from the South—like when I was working in a bakery in Vermont, and my coworkers were amazed by my customer service abilities. Being trained in pleasantness as a fledgling Southern belle, what was second nature to me was awe-inspiring to my New England counterparts.

Having lived in multiple locations outside of the South, I can now be more objective about how our culture stacks up against others. These experiences have helped me to see what is peculiar to this location versus what is universal. And having Ryan here gives me a midwestern perspective on the South, bringing new insights all the time.

I have returned to Athens to settle with my husband and start a family here on my own terms. I am choosing to be part of UUFA, to be part of a community that is working toward social justice and creating a better world. I feel empowered to choose the aspects of Southern culture I want to pass on to my son and talk with him about those I hope he will help change during his lifetime.

The fourth principle of Unitarian Universalism—a free and responsible search for truth and meaning—encourages each of us to reflect on our roots and the truths we inherit with them, to use our wings to explore the world and seek new insights, and to figure out for ourselves what it all means. I appreciate UUFA because it provides a space and a community in which to do all of this, and I'm grateful that our son will grow up in an environment in which he can have strong roots and still be encouraged to fly.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. How deep do your spiritual roots grow? How do your wings work in balance with these roots? Which pull do you feel more strongly—to reach down deeper, or to lift up higher? How do you respond to that pull?
2. What aspects of your upbringing do you incorporate into your identity now? What parts of your identity have you gathered from elsewhere?
3. Who in this Fellowship or elsewhere made space for you to fly? How? Have you paid it forward? To whom?