

LEAVING THE ISLAND
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, May 2007

I've been thinking lately about what it means to me to be living on an island. While writing this sermon, I have been considering how "islands" relate to us as metaphors, as well as geography. When the words of John Donne came to my mind, as you might do sometimes when beginning to reflect about an insight, I've just sat with them for the last several days.

When Donne wrote these words, in Renaissance times, his lyrical expression of the interconnectedness of humankind must have come in sharp contrast to other thinkers who sought isolation, wishing to truly form islands out of the continent of humanity. And his words popped into my head as I thought about what I might say to us this afternoon, here on our own little "island" of the UUCWI . So let me set a scene for you.

Neil's Clover Patch Cafe, in Bayview, is the kind of place someone might envision if they were reading a story about a rural community, or listening to Garrison Keillor talk about the ChatterBox Cafe in Lake Wobegon, or remembering a small town of one's childhood.

Every morning, regularly, seven or eight grizzled characters in overalls, grimy boots, and tattered baseball caps gather in one corner of the Clover Patch for coffee and commentary on whatever is going on in the local scene.

I like the Clover Patch too and occasionally end up there for breakfast on a quiet morning. The guys in the corner nod and “mornin” at me when I come in but we aren’t on real speaking terms, I not being a longtime local.

One morning I was sipping my coffee and overheard one fellow moan, “I gotta go, guys, I gotta go over to America this morning”. The commiserating comments of the other men made it clear that going to America meant going to the mainland, the place of big box stores, of traffic, of hustle and bustle, of political strife, and way too many people.

The conversation that I overheard made me think about why I had moved to Whidbey Island a year ago. I too had been seeking shelter from the shopping malls, the traffic, the noise, the cramped spaces of my small apartment, the crowded streets and neighborhoods, the distractions of the city.

It has been a year now that I have lived on Whidbey Island. Most of you know that I live in a pretty setting of 8 acres, with tall Doug fir and alder, blackberry bushes, and several fruit trees. And bunnies, lots of birds, a few deer and coyote, and more bunnies. I’m sure my blood pressure went down 20 notches when I left my eccentric Seattle landlady and got more elbow room and more solitude.

It was a good move, but after living here for several months, I began to notice something interesting. I found that I felt resentful about leaving the island, sitting in a long ferry line, paying money to get on the boat, driving in Seattle traffic all to continue my work with the Religious Coalition for Equality, and generally wanting to stay at home most of the time.

It surprised me. For an extrovert, I sure was enjoying my solitude. I was happy to have company, happy to visit other islanders, happy to work with this congregation, but I really didn't want to leave the island. I had not expected this response.

Sure, it was almost 50 miles one way to Seattle First Baptist church for RCE steering committee meetings, and I didn't really want to give it up because I love doing that work, but I started thinking about how nice it would be to stay home and not go to Seattle a couple of times a month to attend RCE meetings and events. I was content on my island and just wanted to stay here. And that worried me.

What does it mean to live on an island? Whidbey is quite a progressive place, at least here on the south end. Freeland, our town-of-sorts, since it's not incorporated, was established by a bunch of socialist freethinkers as a utopian community in the early 1900s. It's a nice place to live and I'm delighted to be serving this congregation.

Now, this homily is not about Whidbey Island, but about the islands we may cling to in our lives, the ways we may isolate ourselves protectively from the demands of the "mainland". For during my mulling over of my own desire to isolate myself from the real world of "America", I noticed some things that make me wonder.

One of the things I noticed is that Unitarian Universalism can be an island, beautiful and safe and removed from the not-so-safe world.

An example: I am a member of the interfaith lectionary study group on Whidbey, comprised of Jim Lindus and Mikkel Hustad, our Lutheran pastors, David Vergin of Langley United Methodist, Nigel Taber-Hamilton, of St. Augustine, Fr. Rick Spicer of St. Hubert's, and Glen Horn, the House of Prayer pastor.

Most of their traditions are struggling with the issues of welcoming of sexual minorities; for two of them, it's not even a conversation yet. And I sit there smugly, safe on my island of UUism, and rejoice inwardly that my tradition has knocked down this barrier in most ways. That feels good, to be safe on my religious island.

I think we may all enjoy that safe island, that place that makes us feel special, more intelligent, more evolved than other religious traditions. We like feeling like we alone know the joy and pleasure that comes from being so advanced, so knowledgeable, so self-----righteous?

Are there other islands that we cling to? I'm reminded of the reality show Survivor, when everyone strove mightily to avoid being kicked off the island!

What are we missing when we stay on the island? Literally, when I am clinging to Whidbey Island, I'm missing Fred Meyer, Trader Joe's, Nordstrom's, traffic---no, I'm not really missing that. But I do miss the variety of resources that are available on the mainland, though not enough to seek them out very often!

. What are we missing when we stay on the metaphorical island? And what are some of those metaphorical islands? It seems to me that we all inhabit several.

There's, of course, the island of liberal religion, in our case, Unitarian Universalism. There's the island of progressive politics or political party. There's the island of social causes, such as peace issues or civil rights. There's the island of class and privilege, the island of higher education, of profession. And there are the islands of race, of age, of abledness, of gender.

To leave any of these metaphorical islands, we need to cross a shoreline littered with fears, prejudices, and misunderstandings. Most of the time, it's easier to stay on our islands, cut off from understanding the folks on another shore.

The death of the Rev. Dr. Jerry Falwell this past week has induced a flurry of commentary in the media about his legacy, his good causes and his nefarious causes, sprinkled with a hefty dose of wild opinions offered by the man during his heyday.

One commenter, on a blog I read occasionally, made the observation that Jerry Falwell did indeed alter the political and religious scene in the United States, causing Americans to sit up and take notice of the many people in the U.S. who had strong reservations about the cultural direction of our nation, on both the left and the right.

He not only galvanized conservative religious folk into the Moral Majority but also galvanized the progressive religious traditions into being more outspoken, more visible, more committed to the social justice causes of progressive faith. Yes, he polarized the American religious scene, but he made us all leave the island long enough to recognize that there was danger in complacency and staying on our islands.

As I was writing this, I happened to mention on my blog (Ms. Kitty's Saloon and Road Show) that I had started thinking about UUism as an island, and one of my readers, whom I know as "Linguist Friend" and a professor of physiological linguistics at Bowling Green State University, sent me a quote that I found touched the heart of what I was thinking.

It's by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and was written in 1966 but has impact for us today:

"No religion is an island. We are all involved with one another. Spiritual betrayal on the part of one of us affects the faith of all of us. Views adopted in one community have an impact on other communities. Today religious isolationism is a myth. For all the profound differences in perspective and substance, Judaism is sooner or later affected by the intellectual, moral, and spiritual events within the Christian society, and vice versa.

"We fail to realize that while different exponents of faith in the world of religion continue to be wary of the ecumenical movement, there is another ecumenical movement, world-wide in extent and influence: nihilism. We must choose between interfaith and inter-nihilism. Cynicism is not parochial. Should religions insist upon the illusion of complete isolation?

"Should we refuse to be on speaking terms with one another and hope for each other's failure? Or should we pray for each other's health, and help one another in preserving one's respective legacy, in preserving a common legacy?"

Heschel's words address our world situation today, as well as in 1966. We see the frenzied activity of fundamentalist religions, we see ourselves combating their rhetoric with our own, rarely crossing the divide to see who the other side is, rarely leaving our liberal islands to discover what the other side may teach us.

One of the things I like so much about belonging to the lectionary group is that for an hour or so every week, I leave my little island of UUism and sit in a metaphorical boat with pastors of other faiths, some radically different from mine.

For that hour, I read the Bible, pray, and converse about religious matters in a setting where I am in the minority, where I am one voice among several.

I commiserate with my Methodist colleague about the struggle in his denomination to undo the tangles of social justice disputes in his tradition. I worry with my Episcopalian colleague about the ruptures in the Anglican communion over similar issues. I support the work of my Lutheran colleagues who confront different challenges in their local churches. I listen with interest to my Catholic colleague, who has a much different take on issues than others because of the Roman hierarchy. And I enjoy the comments of my colleague who pastors the House of Prayer and appreciate his insights into scripture from a more conservative point of view.

At the end of our time together, I feel expanded, better prepared to understand the religio-cultural soup in which we Americans swim. I care for these colleagues and am inspired by the knowledge that each of us is doing our part to offer spiritual experience and guidance to those in our congregations.

I don't agree with them on many theological points. They don't agree with each other! I do agree with their commitment to serve the people in the ways which they have learned best express their own relationship with the Divine.

When Pastor David Vergin invited me to join the lectionary group, I was excited, but dubious. Would a former Baptist preacher's kid who had gone over to the other side of the religious continuum fit in? Would I have anything valuable to share? Would I be heard if I offered some outrageous opinion that contradicted everything they stood for? Would anyone quit if I joined?

After one occasion in which I made a comment about a Bible passage and nobody said a word, I almost dropped out, thinking that I was surely in the wrong place. I wanted to go back to my own island of UUism, where I didn't feel I was treading on toes when I said something. I wanted to represent a UU point of view and a woman's point of view, but I feared I wasn't up to the task.

But my desire, my need, to be part of a clergy group here overcame my fears and instead I made a little speech to them the next time we met, saying how much I appreciated their inviting me to be part of the group, even though they knew my theology was different from theirs.

I think it was Jim Lindus who quipped, at that point, “heck, we’re just glad when anyone wants to be part of this crew!” and the tension in me dissipated immediately as we all laughed.

In what ways do we leave the metaphorical islands we live on? How have you kept yourself from isolating on your metaphorical islands? The challenges are great!

It’s challenging to understand the political stance of a different political party. It’s difficult to understand the differing opinions on social justice causes. It’s hard to leave behind one’s island of class and privilege, even when we know we must. It’s hard to shed the sense of entitlement that education and profession offer. And we struggle to come to terms with the islands of race, age, ability, gender.

Leaving the island, however, brings us into connection with resources and opportunities we can only imagine. Just as leaving Whidbey on the ferry means we can shop at Trader Joe’s for a change, instead of Payless, leaving the island of Democratic politics to look for ethical Republicans expands our sense of hope for the future.

Leaving the island of class and privilege to seek ways of being in relationship with a larger group of good human beings enriches our lives with new friendships.

Leaving the islands of race, age, ability, and gender to seek friends of many kinds increases our compassion and our understanding of the lives of people whose culture and daily activities are so different from ours.

I think there are benefits we can hardly imagine. I think there are opportunities to transform and be transformed, when we leave the island.

Leaving the island, going to “America” in a metaphorical sense may be what we as human beings need to do to transform this conflicted world into a world at peace. Let’s see if we can do it, individually, and as a congregation, as we reach out to all those other inhabitants of this island we call earth.

Let’s pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Song: Blue Boat Home

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that though our islands may be safe and comfortable, they can also isolate us. May we have the courage to leave them behind on occasion and may we seek to help others leave the islands that limit their possibilities. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.