



REIMAGINING AND REMAKING SERIES

# *TO ARRIVE WHERE WE STARTED*

MAY 3 | REV. BETH DANA

Return again, return again. Return to the home of your soul. I've lived here in Texas for over 14 years now, but the 10 years prior to coming here taught me something about wandering, returning, wandering again, and coming home.

After I graduated from high school in Upstate New York, I moved to Ohio for college. A year and a half later, I was back in New York, having transferred to a college in New York City. Just a few months later, I left for a semester in Ghana, then back to New York. After another few months, I took a job at the Unitarian Universalist Association in Boston, was there for two years, and then I returned to New York. I finished my undergrad degree and then moved all the way to California for seminary. Two years later, I returned to New York.

Along the way, I met a Texan who became my wife.

Yay. And so quite unexpectedly, I moved to Texas. And here I am. I'm at home.

My best friend from high school moved all around the world during those same years. From Upstate New York, she went to live in Vermont, New Orleans, Ireland, Switzerland, Colorado, and Mississippi. She has traveled to every continent except Antarctica. She got a PhD, published a book, taught at the high school and college level, became a certified yoga instructor, drove ambulances as an EMT and patrolled ski slopes, hiked the Himalayas and all 46 of the Adirondack High Peaks, and is now in school to become a PA. A few years ago, she moved back to Upstate New York. She's at home.

Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, the 19th century Unitarian writer and educator, said, "Wherever I can be myself and act, if not speak, my soul is my home." Mr. Emerson, referring to Unitarian Minister Ralph

Waldo Emerson, says, "Our home is not this home or town or even a particular body. It is the unity of our character. I'm not only coming to the place home, but to the being home," she said.

So while my friend and I had different journeys that led us to settle in different places, we are both at home. Home isn't only a physical place, a town, a building, or even a body. It's a state of being, a unity of character. It's something you create. It's a connection to self and others and the divine. My friend traveled the world, literally, trying to find her place and her calling in life, and she found it by returning home to Albany, but also to the home of her soul. I found it by going someplace unexpected, Texas, a place where I have created a life and a family, I feel connected, and I'm doing meaningful work that is rooted in the experiences that have shaped me.

The poet T.S. Eliot wrote, "We shall not cease from exploration, and at the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." Return again, return again. Return to the home of your soul. We've sung these words again and again over the course of our church's theme year. Hopefully they've become a part of your journey as they have mine. The spiritual journey back to our center, reclaiming what connects us with ourselves, with each other, and with the divine, a spiritual journey perhaps of returning to where we started and experiencing it anew with a fresh perspective.

I wonder, and I invite you to reflect on what you know now about yourself and others, about our faith, about our world, that you didn't know when you started the journey of this year.

I asked our ninth-grade Coming of Age class that question last Sunday about, "What do you know about yourself, about Unitarian Universalism, our church, that you didn't know at the beginning of this year?" And their responses were so varied and so beautiful. In a way, it's a question of asking, in what ways have you been transformed? Born and reborn, as the song says.

We began the year by reconnecting with the essence of our shared spiritual life, the center that holds us as a church community with an exploration of practice, reason, covenant, and love. And we reflected on what we have inherited from our ancestors of faith and what of this we carry forward.

I've thought a lot this year about ancestors and roots. Every time I visit family in the Northeast, people ask me, "When are you moving home?" It's such an interesting and very loaded question. The question definitely implies some bias against Texas in a lot of cases. And of course, I will always feel a sense of familiarity and comfort in the part of the country where I grew up. It's where my family roots are, where my ancestors settled centuries ago. So how do we remain connected with our ancestors, familial or faith ancestors, when we're not necessarily in close physical proximity to the land where those roots were established? Many people over the years have had to figure this out, whether they left that land willingly or had it taken from them or were taken from it.

I read an amazing book recently called *Bad Indians Book Club: Reading at the Edge of A Thousand Worlds* by Patty Krawec, which recounts an Ojibwe Anishinaabe creation story about a flood, a common theme in creation stories. The main figure in this story is Nanaboozhoo, whose anger at the death of his younger brother unleashes a flood of water. Depending on who tells the story,

Nanaboozhoo clings to the top of a tree or to a floating log and works with an animal, sometimes a beaver, sometimes a muskrat, to dive down to the bottom of the water and retrieve a handful of mud. And Nanaboozhoo takes this mud and scatters it over the back of a turtle, recreating the world we now know as North America from the mud of the old world.

Krawec writes, "Our task is to reach down, as in the Anishinaabe flood narrative, for that handful of mud from the old world, which will help us either build a new world or build a place for ourselves within it." This being ready, this reaching back into the past to collaboratively build a future is how we imagine ourselves living in the future. She quotes a Maori proverb that says, "I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on the past."

Krawec and the story that she retells is speaking of the world, but when I read this, I thought about how it was so true for our individual lives as well. We carry with us a part of the homes that we have had, the mud. We are made of that mud, of dust and dirt, as so many creation stories have said, and so we can be at home and create home in many places, moving forward by returning to ourselves.

Every year, our church community in some way explores our ancestors of faith so that we can learn from them, be inspired, build on their legacy, and become ancestors ourselves. Krawec asks in her book, "As future generations walk backward into the future, what will they see when they fix their eyes on us?"

After beginning our theme year, reconnecting with the essence of our shared spiritual life and reflecting on our ancestries, we moved into a season of breaking open. Of course, the breaking open of this year was not limited to the month of December. The world broke open this year in some ways that we saw coming and in ways that we never could have dreamed. There were cracks that let the light in, hearts stretched to hold both despair and hope, society, as we've known it, breaking down in a number of ways, and powerful forces of good breaking through and showing the promise of transformation.

Rebecca Solnit just published a book entitled *The Beginning Comes After the End*. The last paragraph of the book, and I promise no spoiler alert needed, but you should go read the rest, the last paragraph is this. "The climate crisis is only the latest breaking point in this history of breakage, but maybe this time around, it's not just break as in broken, but as in breaking with the past, or rather breaking with that past to embrace deeper pasts. What if this civilization was not a pinnacle or a conclusion of cultural evolution as was asserted again and again for centuries, but a detour from a widely shared understanding? What if that old world was dying and a new world was struggling to be born, or rather an upstart world that had emerged in the 16th century or so in Europe was dying, and the new world struggling to be born was the rememberer and heiress of older worlds that better met human and ecological needs, in part by better describing the world? What if this is an end to the idea that those worlds ended or must end or otherwise be consigned to the past? What if our best hope reaches for the future by sinking its roots deep into its past? What futures can we build on those other versions of the past, those other voices with other stories to tell? What beginnings come after such an end?"

I love what she's saying about breaking with the past to embrace deeper pasts and that our best hope reaches for the future by sinking its roots deep into the past. Her words resonate with the image of taking that handful of mud and using it to create a new home, moving forward into the future while looking backwards, returning to the home of our soul again and again.

I believe this breaking open is why you have been here in such great numbers this year. Those who have been part of this church have recommitted in so many ways. Some who had gone away have returned, and others are seeking out this community for the first time. We are looking for a place to hold and tend and heal the brokenness and to help us transform the broken places into sources of strength, to reimagine and remake our lives and our world to reflect the kind of home that we are seeking, the kind of home that Starhawk speaks about in our reading, a community where we can speak with passion, where we are received as we are, where our strengths are joined to do the work that needs to be done, where we are held when we falter and where we can be free.

From New Year's until Easter, we broke with the more recent pasts to reconnect with the values and ideas of deeper pasts, our Unitarian Universalist faith and values, and traditional religious language and practices. We reflected on the values that shape and guide us, justice, equity, transformation, pluralism, interdependence, generosity, and love. And we returned to some traditional language and concepts like sin, faith, blessing, sacrament, confession, and Christ to reclaim them and understand and practice them in new and powerful ways.

Alongside these explorations in worship, a small group of you met weekly for a new class called Shifting Faith. Our director of adult ministries, Josh Esparza, led the group on a journey of questioning, deconstructing, and rethinking issues of faith, God, and church in their lives, reflecting on how their religious pasts have shaped their present religious identity and yearnings, and imagining how they want to be people of faith here and in the future. All of this in worship and outside of worship was a journey of healing and wholeness, or to use one of those religious terms of salvation, the unity of past and present and future.

When I think back on this year, one image that comes to mind is the labyrinth. For more than 4,000 years, people have journeyed through labyrinths as a spiritual practice of moving inward for reflection and outward for transformation. We prepared for the journey by grounding ourselves in our spiritual home. We journeyed inward, looking to the past, but also reflecting on what we carry, breaking it open and letting some things go. After reaching the center, we began journeying back out, letting our way be guided by our shared Unitarian Universalist values, returning to who we are and where we are, letting ourselves be transformed by the process, reborn, seeing our place and our home anew.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are always exploring and seeking new spiritual truths, but ultimate understanding lies in arriving back at our starting point, the home of our soul, and knowing it in new ways in light of new experiences and the insights and wisdom gained therefrom.

Solnit asks us in her book, "What beginnings come after such an end?" As we emerge from this theme year, from the threshold of the labyrinth, mud in hand, what home will we create together for

ourselves and our neighbors and for those of us yet to join us? The answers are many, but this is the work of our church. It is the work of our strategic plan to build a church that is engaging and impactful, sustainable and equitable, carrying handfuls of mud from our past while moving into the future together. It is the work of our covenant, our affirmation that we say together every week to build a home in which all souls shall grow in harmony with the divine. It is the work of our hearts and hands every day to create a place where all can be themselves, can be at home in their soul, and can be free.

I'm so glad to be on this journey together with you. May this ending of the theme year be a new beginning. Onward, friends, and amen.