

## Sabbatical Reflections

Sunday, February 18, 2024

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

### Slides for All Ages: A Few Glimpses

I wanted to show a few slides before the children, youth and adult volunteers go off to Religious Education. Thanks to the generosity of this congregation, I was gone for five months of rest, reading, travel, catching up with old friends and working on some long-delayed projects. I missed you. I assume that I've been changed by this time away, but I'm still figuring out how to explain it.

I think this congregation has changed also. For example, I would like everyone who has begun attending UUSS since the end of August to put your name in the chat in Zoom. And if you're here in person, and you started coming since the end of August, please rise. Welcome. I'm glad you're here.

I have just a few pictures of my time away. Here is a slide of one of the hardest things I did—reading. SLIDE—Roger in recliner chair. I know I look as if I was comfortable, and that's the problem. I dozed off a lot. Also, since don't read very fast, it takes me awhile to get through a book.

In September I made my second trip ever to the country of Poland. For a week I co-led a tour of our Unitarian heritage in southern Poland. There will be a sermon about that history in March. It's a beautiful country. After the tour ended, I visited other cities and spent a day in Gdynia, which is a port city on the Baltic Sea. SLIDE—black sculpture of three fish along the beach in Gdynia. I liked many of the public sculptures, like this one, but my favorite works of art were the decorated bicycles, which a local organization uses to promote more cycling, like this one.

SLIDE—Bicycle. In Polish, the sign on this one says *If you want to be a hero, make friends with your bike.*

A special trip I took was to visit the country of Japan. My partner and I spent two weeks there. SLIDE—park view. We saw lovely parks, like this one in Tokyo. One of my favorite things about Japan is that there are temples and shrines in big city neighborhoods as well as in quiet settings in the countryside. SLIDE—Buddhist garden. We strolled through Buddhist gardens and looked at temples.

SLIDE—Shinto shrine. We visited Shinto shrines—small shrines and enormous ones. I'll talk about that in April.

We also went to art museums and history museums. Also, Kyoto has a wonderful railway museum. SLIDE—Roger inside train locomotive. One of my favorite locomotives there is this old one, but I just couldn't figure out how to get it to move.

You may wonder if I did any preaching during my time away. A few times, yes. I preached two Sundays in a row for the UU Fellowship in the Mexican city of San Miguel de Allende. SLIDE—big lighted church. This slide is not the UU Fellowship. No, this is the Catholic Church on the main plaza of San Miguel. The Unitarian Universalists there meet in a large meeting room on the second

floor of a lovely old hotel (Posada de la Aldea). Their services are in English, though they have Chalice Lighting words in Spanish and English.

I also preached in Japan. No, I don't speak Japanese. But somehow, I found a congregation willing to pay attention to me. SLIDE – Roger with group of deer.

This is a scene in a large park in the city of Nara. There are over a thousand deer in Nara Park. There is also a holy shrine in the park, and the story is that many centuries ago a god rode on the back of a sacred deer to reside in the shrine in this part of the country, so the people there consider deer to be the helpers of the gods.

The deer's diet is primarily grasses, but if you want to feed them, you can buy thin brown crackers made specially for them, without sugar. After being hand-fed for a long time, the deer are unafraid of people. SLIDE—deer following Roger. If you have crackers a deer might chase you, so it's better to feed them.

They're super cute and since deer are usually quite shy, it's amazing to see them up close. SLIDE—Roger hand feeding a deer. They look so cute and cuddly. But they don't really care about people. For the deer, it's all about the crackers. Thank you for your attention and we'll see you after the service and Religious Education.

### Reading

Our Soul Matters theme in February is Justice and Equity. In human history, few events have caused more injustice than war. Military invasions, wars of imperialism, and aerial bombings fall inequitably on the most vulnerable groups in any land. I was reminded of this during my travels as I paused to see countless monuments erected to remember those lost in wars. Of course, nearly any European country bears many battlefield cemeteries, covering centuries. In Paris, the Arc du Triomphe is a famous landmark honoring those who fought in the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. In September, when our tour group was visiting Warsaw, we a ceremony in which Polish people marked the anniversary of the invasion by Germany on September 8, 1939, as well as the Soviet army's attack on Warsaw, nine days later. There were speeches and music, and flowers laid at the foot of a memorial sculpture.

This is a poem from 1998 by the late William Stafford, entitled "At the Un-National Monument along the Canadian Border."

This is the field where the battle did not happen,  
where the unknown soldier did not die.  
This is the field where grass joined hands,  
where no monument stands,  
and the only heroic thing is the sky.

Birds fly here without any sound,  
unfolding their wings across the open.  
No people killed—or were killed—on this ground  
hallowed by neglect and an air so tame  
that people celebrate it by forgetting its name.

### Hymn Introduction

The Unitarian minister Jacob Trapp wrote several hymn texts about freedom and peace, including # 148 in the gray hymnal, Let Freedom Span Both East and West. The tune for the hymn comes from an African American spiritual, which was adapted and harmonized by the African American composer and singer Harry T. Burleigh. Burleigh's arrangements of many spirituals sparked the interest of Antonin Dvorak, among other composers. Let us rise and sing #148.

### Sermon: A Few Lessons

I can't say it enough to this congregation. *Thank you* for the generous gift of a sabbatical. I missed you while I was gone, but I can tell you that I am rested, ready, and happy to be back in ministry here. It worked!

When I gave my farewell sermon on September 3, I said that one goal for my time off would be to rest. Not so much to sleep a lot more, though sometimes I did. But as I said last fall, *to rest* really means to cease doing what you normally are occupied with doing. Take a pause. Take a breath. Even though I kept this congregation in my heart, the time away allowed my mind to *unplug* from the ongoing series of meetings, deadlines, requests, phone messages and email communications. It freed up time for me to catch up on some projects, read more than usual, meditate and exercise more than usual, and travel more than usual.

Today I will give you just a few glimpses of my travels and think aloud about one or two lessons I learned. In the coming months I plan to weave in more insights and pictures. While I can tell you my stories, I am not sure I can fully explain or answer the question: what happened to me?

Along with the Reverend Alex da Silva Souto, who is the minister at our Sierra Foothills congregation, in September I visited Paris, France, for a few days. Our UUSS members Tiffany and Clair spend a few months there every year. They helped us to find an affordable place to stay near their apartment. They hosted a breakfast so we could meet some of the members of the UU Fellowship of Paris. That congregation is made up of American, British, and European religious liberals with a variety of stories about when and why they moved to Paris. Some have been there for decades, working and raising children. On the first morning after we arrived, Tiffany showed us how to get around on transit and on foot. She led us through several neighborhoods.

When she left us on our own for the day, we were next to the famous Notre Dame cathedral. Next to the cathedral was an underground historical monument, called the Memorial to the Martyrs of the Deportation. We went through its narrow entry surrounded by high concrete walls. Filling three levels underground, it was quiet and cool on a hot afternoon. Photographs and inscriptions told the history that 200,000 French people, mostly French Jews, had been deported to Nazi death camps with the collaboration and help of the French government in the 1940s. It was sobering and sad. I had been to Paris before, but I had never read or heard of this massive structure, even though President Charles De Gaulle had inaugurated it in 1962.

Going to nearly any country in Europe is an opportunity to behold many marvelous results of human creativity—parks, fountains, art museums, music halls and architectural masterpieces. Such a visit also puts you in places where so much of human history has been tragic, ridiculous, wasteful, and cruel. The tone of William Stafford's poem, which I read earlier, is haunting but hopeful. It's a prayer for peace in a world of so much devastation. He writes:

This is the field where the battle did not happen,  
where the unknown soldier did not die.  
This is the field where grass joined hands,  
where no monument stands,  
and the only heroic thing is the sky.

For me, a favorite part of traveling is having conversations with people who live in the places I visit. After Paris, we were in Poland for a Unitarian heritage tour that I would be co-leading with the Rev. Dr. Jay Atkinson. One of our local guides was a UU woman from Warsaw named Justyna. I had met her on an earlier tour in 2019, along with her daughter, who's now in college. On a bus ride one day, Justyna told me that when Nazi Germany had occupied Poland, it rounded up Polish Jews for concentration camps. Her mother-in-law had been a little girl in a family that had a pet cat. Her family was not Jewish, and they hid some Jewish neighbors in the basement to keep them safe. It was a Nazi punishment, when such violations were found out, that the family who owned the house would be killed on the spot, as well as those in hiding. One day Nazi soldiers arrived. They came into the house to search through it, holding a fierce police dog on a leash. They were preparing to look downstairs. Thinking quickly, the little girl took the cat and slid it across the floor of the living room. The police dog went wild and scrambled after the cat. Distracted by this pandemonium, the soldiers retrieved their dog and left. The cat survived, and so did the girl's family and their neighbors in hiding. By this family story, I am reminded of the precarious nature of human life, and of the resilience that human beings can demonstrate. I am struck that sometimes to show human kindness calls for the greatest courage.

In southern Poland, Krakow is a charming old city with a beautiful basilica church. I've read that its main square is the largest in Europe. It's a busy plaza, surrounded by arcades of restaurants and cafes which are filled with tourists from other parts of Europe. As a minister friend and I wandered the cobblestone square, we were drawn to voices and flags in front of a monument in the center. A group of six women and three men in traditional Ukrainian outfits were using a portable microphone and speaker. With tears running down their cheeks, three of them spoke about the war at home in Ukraine, which was just across the border. They passed out fliers asking for donations to help the soldiers back home. Holding blue and yellow flags, they sang patriotic songs. We discretely took some photographs and then moved forward, putting some Polish currency in the bucket in front of them. Justyna, our Polish friend, told us that after Russia had invaded Ukraine, refugees arrived by the hundreds and thousands at railway stations in Krakow, Warsaw, and other cities. Every station was a chaotic, unorganized mess. She said that Polish people of all ages—including her elderly mother—had gone down to their local stations to help out, offering food or transportation, and sometimes offering a room to stay in.

It can be so easy to isolate ourselves from the hardship and injustice that many people go through. This trip helped me remember how comfortable my life has become, and to remember that in most of history, human life has been precarious. While I am not sure the donation that I made has helped Ukraine's defenses very much, I hope it mattered as a way of bearing witness to the injustice of a war which threatens millions of people.

As a lifelong U. S. American, I learned about the Second World War first from relatives who had gone through it, whether abroad or here at home. I learned more about it in an American high school and college. Consequently, for much of my life I thought of that war as an event, an occurrence, that Americans *went to*. It was in other places. The war was a threat to the United States, to be sure, but it was fought in other countries. The war took place in people's homes, in their villages, in the middle of their cities. It was all around them. In the city of Gdansk there is a great museum about the war—depicting its causes, the many countries where it was fought, and the extent of its destruction. It covers Europe's misery after the war. It shows the beginnings of the Cold War, and the renewed forms of repression that fell across the lives of people in Eastern and Central Europe. In contrast to the perspective I had grown up with, this museum provided me a frame of reference of the people who had been living in places where the war was taking place.

Most human lives have always been precarious, owing to unjust economic and social systems which other humans have constructed, and to hatred and cruelty, greed and selfishness, and simple indifference to the lives of others. Yet human beings can be resilient and brave.

Over a three-day stop in Hong Kong, I saw gleaming skyscrapers, impressive museums and art galleries, local shops and food markets. I enjoyed a variety of restaurants. On a humid evening after dark, I watched the sparkling skyline from a ferry boat to and from Kowloon Peninsula. I saw the high-rise buildings where my partner had grown up, and the places he'd gone to school before moving to California--brightly painted school buildings with outdoor areas for athletics. We also visited plazas and streets where demonstrations for democracy had taken place. One of these was called the Umbrella Revolution, which took place in 2014. This was a 79-day occupation of the city by demonstrators holding umbrellas as a sign of passive resistance. The people were demanding more transparency in their elections because the Chinese Communist Party increased its control over the government of Hong Kong, which it owns. The police used pepper spray to disperse the people. Today, there is no sign of that historic demonstration in Hong Kong, or of an even larger series of protests in 2019, which lasted several months. That one led to mass arrests and prosecutions of protestors. A former journalist in Hong Kong told me that when people would gather to demonstrate, they would unscrew the bolts in the sturdy metal fences that run between the sidewalks and city streets. They take down a fence in order for the crowds to spill out into the street. He told me that you can tell where a demonstration has been, because the government has put new bolts on the fences—bolts that are tamper-proof. He sent pictures of newly bolted fences.

While the city's vibrant commerce, banking, arts, and culture seem to hum along, its people remain vulnerable to the looming threat of China and the loss of more freedoms. For example, teachers who work in Hong Kong schools now have to make a trip to China for a government agency to train them on the right way to teach history to Hong Kong children. The city is not in a war zone, but the lives and freedoms of its people are under threat.

Some of my most memorable experiences when traveling come from putting myself in unfamiliar situations. Especially if I don't know the language, finding my way around a new place is an exercise in being uncomfortable. Though I don't like the feeling

at all, I can appreciate the experience afterwards. I can remember such an episode better and longer than I do those journeys which were easy and comfortable.

In Warsaw, our UU pilgrimage came to an end, and I said goodbye to our 12 traveling companions, including Jan and Patty from this congregation. Then I got on a train for a three-hour trip to the northern city of Gdansk. A minister friend and I were going to share an apartment in Gdansk for a week, but for the first night I'd be there on my own. I had booked an inexpensive hostel outside of the city center. Using the Wi-Fi on the train, I figured out on my smartphone which of the local trains I should transfer to in order to get to the hostel.

I usually have interesting conversations over morning coffee with other guests in hostels, but I had to find it first. After my train arrived at the station in Gdansk, I waited on a platform for a local train.

*Oh! I'm waiting for the wrong train!* I found the correct platform. *Oops--I need a ticket for this train!* I got a ticket and then got on the local train. It was crowded, but I had to stand for only two stops before getting out.

A SIM card I'd bought for my phone in Paris wasn't working in Poland. Even without internet, I counted on Google maps to stay on my phone long enough for me to make a half-mile walk to the hostel. But outside the station I found it confusing. There was a highway nearby that I might have to walk under, and a bridge over a stream that I might or might not have to cross. I couldn't figure it out.

A school had just let out and a group of adolescent youths leaned against a red-brick building, chatting, and having snacks from a nearby store. *Does anyone speak English?* I muttered as I lugged my suitcase and backpack in their direction. They either didn't hear me, or they ignored me. I kept walking. A girl with blond hair crossed my path. *Excuse me, do you speak English?* I asked. She said yes. She was about 11. I tried to explain that I wanted help in getting oriented according to the map on my phone so I could walk to my hostel, but she didn't seem to understand that much English after all. Yet she wanted to help.

She asked me: "Where are you from?" *USA, California*, I said. She smiled. "Oh, I am from Ukraine!" She took my phone and studied the map as we stood on a sidewalk. In a few moments, an old blue four-door car pulled up. "Oh, there's my mom," she said. "She speaks English." She took my phone over to the car and showed it to her mom. They spoke. Then her mom got out of the car and came over to me. She gave me back the phone. She said, "I don't know how to tell you to get there. Get in and we'll take you." *Are you sure?* I said.

She opened the trunk and I put in my luggage. She opened the back door, and I got in. I found myself sitting next to a car seat which held a baby boy. Mom and her daughter sat in the front. We took off. "My name is Anna and this is my daughter, Veronika." *Nice to meet you. I am Roger. And who is this?* "He's Aleksander." The baby smiled at me and reached out. "We're from Ukraine," she said. I asked: *How long have you been here?* "About a year," she said; "since the war started. It's a pity, but..." and her voice trailed off. As we were having this conversation, Aleksander's little hands grabbed my ear and twisted. He smiled. I cringed in pain. I couldn't move anywhere, so I would push his hands

away and hold them still. He would break free and grab me again. It made my arthritic thumb ache to wrestle with him. While driving and talking, his mom didn't notice, and I didn't want to complain. Even though it hurt, at the same time I had to stifle my laughter at the situation I found myself in. Then I speculated about his behavior: *I wonder if there is a father in this family? Is he fighting Russia back home? Is he even alive?*

It occurred to me that this perhaps this baby was taking advantage of having a male adult physically present and in arm's reach after a year of separation. So I tolerated his twisting of my ear, but I couldn't get him to stop in any case. After 10 minutes, Anna turned the car down a residential street and pulled up at a narrow, yellow three-story house, which was my hostel. Anna and I got out and shook hands. *Thank you*, I said; *nice to meet you all*. "Good luck," she said. *Good luck to you*. As I approached the hostel steps, I said to myself: *What just happened?*

It was a most unlikely encounter. It was an ordeal, but the free ride and the memory of it served as a reward for my having put myself in an unfamiliar situation. For me that is one lesson from the sabbatical. The ability to be uncomfortable in uncertainty, learning to have patience in moments of confusion—that is a lesson I don't want to forget.

Now that my sabbatical is over, and life is familiar again, I want to keep my mind open to what is new, what I can learn, and what is important in life. I will strive to go through times of discomfort and uncertainty with trust—trust in other people and myself, trust in life, trust in the Spirit of Life. I seek to recognize the world as a place of beauty as well as hardship and stay open to all of it. I hope to remain friendly to the world and remain open to things that are unclear, confusing, or uncomfortable.

Whatever there is to encounter and experience in our lives, the goal is to live in the moment and stay open. In the days to come, wherever we may find ourselves, no matter how strange or how familiar it may feel to us, let us practice being present to all that we encounter. Let us endeavor to be open to this world, and open to life. Amen.