

ITS BEEN A BUMPY ROAD July 15, 2007

Wednesday I drove over from Muskegon to Mount Pleasant to meet and talk with Jim Dealing, your new president. We spent the afternoon talking about the past, present, and mostly, possible futures of this fellowship. In the evening members of the Board of Trustees met and we extended our conversation. I left about 8:45 as the rain began.

AS I DROVE ON M-20, IT GREW MORE INTENSE, AND WAS SOON POURING. I WAS TORN BETWEEN HOPING IT WOULD SOON STOP, AND THAT IT EXTENDED THE 100 MILES TO MUSKEGON SO THAT IT WOULD REFRESH MY VERY DRY GARDEN AND YARD. AS I NEARED M-66, WHERE I PLANNED TO TURN SOUTH IT BEGAN TO LESSEN, AND SOON I WAS DRIVING IN LIGHT RAIN, WHILE THE SUN SHONE BRIGHTLY THROUGH THE CLOUDS.

THIS IS THE PERFECT CONDITION FOR RAINBOWS, AND WHEN I TURNED SOUTH—THERE IT WAS—A BRIGHT COLORFUL ARC ACROSS THE SKY. I KEPT DRIVING, FOR I HOPED TO REACH M-46 BEFORE THE SUN SET. BUT I KEPT GLANCING AT THE RAINBOW. SOON I NOTICED THE ECHO—A SECOND, FAINTER BOW. THEN I REALIZED THAT IT WAS THAT RARE OCCASION WHEN THE RAINBOW ARCHED PERFECTLY ACROSS THE SKY, BOTH LEGS SEEMINGLY ANCHORED JUST BEYOND MY REACH. AND THE SECOND , ECHOING BOW WAS ALSO COMPLETE.

I'VE NEVER BECOME BLASÉ ABOUT RAINBOWS. THEY ARE A PART OF THE NATURAL WORLD THAT FILLS ME WITH WONDER. EARLY IN OUR HISTORY WE HUMANS ENDOWED THEM WITH SPECIAL POWERS. IN THE HEBREW CULTURE, THEY SYMBOLIZED THE COVENANT OF YAHWEH, THE GOD OF ISRAEL. THUS, THEY BECAME A SYMBOL OF HOPE. NO MATTER WHAT RAIN FALLS ON YOUR JOURNEY, NO MATTER WHAT PAIN IS PRESENT, THE RAINBOW IS THERE TO LIFT YOUR SPIRITS, TO CONNECT YOU WITH THE NATURAL WORLD, AND SYMBOLIZE HOPE, WITHOUT WHICH WE CANNOT LONG SURVIVE.

When I was talking with Jim during an earlier conversation, he suggested that I take this first sermon to introduce myself to you, the members and friends of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan. I agreed that was a good idea, and named this presentation, *Its Been a Bumpy Road*. As you have no doubt noticed, I am not a young woman. My life has already included rearing a family and living in many different locations.

I am a child of the Midwest, born and reared in Illinois. I am the oldest of five children. My father was an agricultural extension agent, so I grew up in small towns among farmers.

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I WAS VERY FORTUNATE, BECAUSE BOTH MY MOTHER, WHO TAUGHT SCHOOL BEFORE THEIR MARRIAGE, AND MY FATHER SIMPLY ASSUMED THAT ALL THEIR CHILDREN, INCLUDING THE GIRLS, WOULD ATTEND COLLEGE. THIS WAS NOT COMMON IN THE 1950'S, WHEN THE OCCUPATIONS OPEN TO MOST WOMEN WERE SECRETARY, TEACHER AND HAIR DRESSER. MY PARENTS WERE METHODISTS, AND MY MOTHER INSISTED THAT WE ALL ATTENDED CHURCH AND SUNDAY SCHOOL EVERY SUNDAY. THE ONLY EXCUSE FOR STAYING HOME WAS IF WE WERE SICK ENOUGH TO BE IN BED, WITH NO BOOKS OR OTHER ENTERTAINMENT TO DISTRACT US. FRIENDS TELL ME I HAD THE PERFECT CHILDHOOD, WITH CARING PARENTS WHO TAUGHT US THEIR MORAL AND ETHICAL CODES

OF CONDUCT.

After I graduated from high school, I attended the University of Illinois for two years, majoring in home economics, and minoring in Speech. I thought I wanted to become a home extension agent, thus following in my father's footsteps. However, I met a young man, Richard Florey, who persuaded me that marriage was most appropriate. He was in ROTC, and decided to take his degree in management into the U.S. Army as a regular officer. He was bright, charming and ambitious.

We married and I began a 20 year career as an Army Officer's Wife. It was a life that criss-crossed the country, took me across the Atlantic to Germany for four years, and included birthing and rearing three children, Kathleen, Tina and Richard. I enjoyed that life. I enjoyed living in Philadelphia, Chicago, Huntsville, Alabama, and many other cities and states. I enjoyed living in three different places in Germany, and the opportunity to explore Western Europe. I enjoyed participating in life on an Army base, accepting positions in the Officer's Wives Club and learning how to work with boards and make things happen. I enjoyed helping to establish and then co-managing a Thrift Shop on one post. I enjoyed leading Girl Scout troops, especially after I taught the girls to light a fire in the rain, and they were able to pass on their skills to the Boy Scouts. I enjoyed watching my children grow and develop and learn new things.

HOWEVER, I DID NOT ENJOY THE EMPHASIS IN ARMY CULTURE ON ACTIVITIES AT THE OFFICER'S CLUB, ACTIVITIES THAT USUALLY INVOLVED HEAVY DRINKING. I DID NOT ENJOY THE YEAR AT FORT HOOD, IN KILLEN, TEXAS. I DESCRIBE IT AS THE LONGEST YEAR OF MY LIFE. IT FEATURED HOT SUN, LITTLE SHADE, A LONG SUMMER, LOTS OF BUGS AND A FEW RATTLESNAKES, ITEMS THAT WERE NOT ON MY LIST OF FUN ELEMENTS OF LIFE. ... AND I DID NOT ENJOY MY HUSBAND'S INCREASING RELIANCE ON ALCOHOL.

He had back-to-back tours in Korea and Vietnam, and returned an active alcoholic. For eight years I tried to persuade him to get some help, but he denied that he had a problem. After we returned from Germany, to Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia, I went back to college. It was clear that I needed to be not only self-sufficient, but able to care for my children.

I finished my B.A. In Columbus. They did not have a program in Home Economics, so I turned my minor in speech into a major in theater, thinking that I could teach speech and theater. This thought process came to an abrupt end with my first education class. I learned that I did not have the skills or patience to teach. I have always respected teachers, but acquired even more as I struggled to remain calm with the troubled youth in that special ed class.

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I DIVORCED RICH, AFTER 20 YEARS OF MARRIAGE AND SET OUT WITH A BRAND NEW DEGREE IN THEATER TO SUPPORT MYSELF AND MY CHILDREN. ... AND THEN MY LIFE BEGAN TO GET EVEN MORE INTERESTING.

A THEATER DEGREE HELPED ME GET A JOB AT AN NBC AFFILIATE AS A LIGHTING DESIGNER. I LATER LEARNED TO DO MOST OF THE TECH JOBS AT THE STATION, RUNNING A CAMERA, SWITCHING,

AND SOMETIMES FURNISHING THE VOICE FOR STATION I.Ds AND PROMOS. I MARRIED AGAIN, A DISASTROUS MOVE. IT WAS 1977, THE HEIGHT OF THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT, AND MY NEW HUSBAND AND HIS TWO YOUNG DAUGHTERS NEEDED “TAKING CARE OF.” THE MARRIAGE ENDED AFTER SEVEN YEARS, BUT I LATER ADOPTED HIS OLDEST DAUGHTER.

WE HAD MOVED TO JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI—ME, THE HUSBAND, HIS TWO DAUGHTERS AND RICHARD, MY SON. BOTH OF MY DAUGHTERS WERE IN COLLEGE IN COLUMBUS. KATHLEEN GRADUATED AND MOVED TO AUSTIN, TEXAS TO ATTEND GRADUATE SCHOOL. TINA STAYED IN COLUMBUS, AND MARRIED AFTER SHE AND HER FIANCE GRADUATED.

It was in Jackson that I found the Unitarian Universalist church. Our neighbors attended, and I appreciated the church's history during the Civil Rights era. The small church in Jackson hosted the only integrated Head Start program in the state. It was also the only place where blacks and whites could meet together.

Mine is the classic story of the “come outer” in our churches. I walked in, found Thomas Jefferson and a Picasso print that showed people of all colors dancing together, and—most of all—people I could talk to! For a liberal from the North it was irresistible. I have seldom missed attending a UU church on Sundays since then.

I AM VERY GLAD THAT I HAD FOUND THE CHURCH AND INTEGRATED INTO ITS CULTURE, FOR A TIME OF TRIAL WAS AHEAD. I HAD ALREADY LEFT MY SECOND HUSBAND AND WAS LIVING WITH MY SON WHEN I RECEIVED A CALL THAT CHANGED MY LIFE. ON OCTOBER 30, 1982, I WAS AWAKENED BY A TELEPHONE CALL FROM A DETECTIVE IN AUSTIN, WHO TOLD ME THAT MY DAUGHTER KATHLEEN HAD BEEN MURDERED.

I NOW KNOW WHAT THE PHRASE, “I FELT LIKE I HAD BEEN KICKED IN THE STOMACH,” MEANS. THE NEWS LITERALLY KNOCKED ME OFF MY FEET. I PULLED MYSELF TOGETHER ENOUGH TO ASK QUESTIONS. GRADUALLY THE STORY EMERGED. THE DAY BEFORE KATHLEEN ANSWERED THE DOOR AT HER APARTMENT. A FELLOW RESIDENT ASKED TO USE THE TELEPHONE, AND SHE LET HIM IN. HE ASSAULTED HER, TIED HER TO HER BED, RAPED AND STRANGLERED HER. THEN HE MUTILATED HER BODY. AT LEAST THAT IS THE ORDER IN WHICH THE DETECTIVE SAID EVENTS OCCURRED. I HOPE IT IS TRUE, FOR IF HE KINDLY SWITCHED THE ORDER, SHE WAS TORTURED BEFORE SHE WAS KILLED.

THESE ARE THE THOUGHTS OF A MOTHER WHO LOST A CHILD TO TRAUMA. I HAVE SINCE LEARNED THAT THERE ARE FAR TOO MANY OF US WHO BELONG TO THE SORORITY OF GRIEVING MOTHERS. PERHAPS SOME OF YOU BELONG TO THIS SAD SORORITY, OR YOU MAY KNOW SOMEONE WHO DOES. ... A TRAUMA OF THIS SORT CHANGES ONE. YOU CAN NEVER FORGET. HOWEVER, YOU CAN LEARN TO LESSEN THE PAIN, AND YOU CAN LEARN TO ENJOY LIFE AGAIN.

I WILL RETURN TO SHARE WITH YOU MORE OF MY HEALING PROCESS, BUT FIRST I WANT TO TELL YOU ABOUT JOHN KRATOCHVIL. JOHN AND I MET AT THE UU CHURCH IN JACKSON WHEN BOTH OF OUR MARRIAGES WERE IN BAD CONDITION. WHEN WE WERE BOTH FREE WE STARTED DATING.

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JOHN, A GRADUATE OF THE KANSAS CITY ART INSTITUTE, WAS A PACKAGING DESIGNER FOR WEYERHAUSER.

HE WAS INTELLIGENT, GENTLE, AND HAD A PASSION FOR JUSTICE THAT MATCHED MINE. HE WAS A DEDICATED UU, ACTIVE IN BOTH OUR LOCAL CHURCH AND THE DISTRICT. TOGETHER WE HELPED LEAD OUR CHURCH, AND TOGETHER WE ATTENDED DISTRICT FUNCTIONS AND ACCEPTED LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN BOTH.

AS WE BECAME MORE AND MORE INVOLVED, IT SEEMED LOGICAL THAT MINISTRY TOGETHER WAS OUR NEXT STEP. WE DECIDED THAT I WOULD ATTEND SCHOOL FIRST, WHILE JOHN CONTINUED WORKING. THEN HE COULD RETIRE, AND ATTEND SCHOOL WHILE I WORKED. IN THE MEANTIME WE CONTINUED TO SERVE THE FAITH COMMUNITY WE LOVED. HE WAS PRESIDENT OF THE CONGREGATION, AND I WAS PRESIDENT OF MIDSOUTH DISTRICT WHEN TRAGEDY AGAIN STRUCK.

WE WERE DRIVING TO THE CHURCH FOR AN EVENING MEETING IN FEBRUARY, 1991, WHEN WE WERE STRUCK BY A DRUNK DRIVER WHO RAN A STOP LIGHT AT 50 MILES PER HOUR. JOHN WAS KILLED, AND I SUFFERED 15 BROKEN BONES. I SPENT THREE WEEKS IN INTENSIVE CARE, AND ALMOST FOUR IN THE HOSPITAL. IT TOOK SEVERAL MONTHS TO PHYSICALLY RECOVER—AND IN THE MEANTIME I AGAIN SHIFTED PLANS FOR THE FUTURE.

At the time, I was the owner/operator of *Nana's Custom Clothing*, a dressmaking and alterations shop. Should I stay in Jackson, where I had many friends and a supportive faith community, or should I follow the dream of ministry that John and I shared? I asked several lay leaders, and all the UU clergy I knew what they thought. To a person they said, "Go for it, Nana!" So, I sold my business and house, and moved to Chicago to attend Meadville/Lombard Theological School.

However, in between the first shock of Kathleen's death, and that move, I had to do a lot of healing. I am now a great believer in seeking support in the counseling profession. I must confess that earlier I was of the "tough it out" school of thought. I learned that when you hit one of those bottomless potholes on the road of life—the kind that rattles your teeth, and knocks your head against the roof—you need to learn to accept help. That's what counselors are for. Since Kathleen's death I have sought out counselors who share my values and beliefs.

Another touchstone for me has always been reading. If you have a problem, go to the library. There is probably a shelf of books containing the wisdom you need to survive a crisis. A former minister recommended Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk*. I copied the bibliography, and by the time I worked my way through it, I was in theological school. I also read books on forgiveness, but was not ready to take that journey yet.

I knew that revenge was not my path to healing. I was a consistent protester at anti-death penalty demonstrations in front of the governor's mansion in Jackson. Kathleen's death did not change my conviction that the death penalty was wrong. However, it was too painful to attend the demonstrations. I was also convinced that if my pain were to have meaning, I was responsible for determining that meaning.

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It was a long, slow process. However, before I entered Meadville/Lombard, I worked out my own personal mission statement. It is: *I will spend the rest of my life working to make the world a safer place for women and children, knowing that it will then also be safer for men.* When I crafted that statement I did not yet know in what mode I would do this work.

I considered politics. One immediate problem presented itself. In Mississippi, if your granddaddy was not from *around here*, you had no standing in the community.

As I thought about it though, I realized that although passing laws and electing good people was a path to justice, there was a precondition necessary. And that is, you must first change the hearts and minds of people so that they desire change. And that brought me back to ministry.

Thus, on a cold January day, I entered Meadville/Lombard as a beginning seminarian. And, on a warm day in May of 1994, I graduated. I learned a lot at Meadville, and a lot at my internship church, in Rochester, New York. I learned more during a student ministry at Hobart, Indiana. And I learned even more as an extension and then a called minister at Muskegon.

However, life itself has been the big teacher. I learned that life is not easy, however it is beautiful. Traumatic deaths, pain and loss do not stop the sun from rising, the grass from growing, nor the rain from falling. They do not stop the birds from flying, kittens from playing, nor babies from cuddling. Nor do they stop rainbows from forming just when you need them. This world—the world celebrated by Mary Oliver—is a place of beauty and wonder.

Life taught me that it is up to each of us to make meaning out of the events that happen to us. Especially the events that bring us pain, that challenge our ability to accept society as it is, that make us wish we could re-live a day and omit that telephone call or trip to the church. It is not easy to do so, however, I believe it is necessary.

Perhaps this last learning is most important. Pain and loss cannot be allowed to make us afraid to love. It is only those whom we love who have the power to cause us acute pain. Eileen Karpels wrote these words of counsel.

*WE CAN KEEP OUR EYES CAST DOWN,
Protecting ourselves from the pain we risk
Whenever we allow another human being to touch us.*

*OR WE CAN REACH OUT RISKING A LITTLE OR A LOT
Or every coin we have,
Because we believe that loving and being loved
Is the only game in town.*

*THE CHOICE IS OURS.
Those who risk much lose much
But they are also the only ones who ever win.*

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LET US BE A PEOPLE WHO RISK MUCH.

LET US BE A PEOPLE WHO LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

LET US BE A PEOPLE WHO LOVE ONE ANOTHER AND OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS.

LET US BE A PEOPLE WHO LOVE ONE ANOTHER AND OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS, INCLUDING

THOSE WITH WHOM WE DISAGREE.

LET US BE A LOVING PEOPLE.

SHALOM AND SAALAT.

BLESSED BE AND AMEN.