

Sunday, October 30, 2011 - Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Upper Valley

The Next Great Adventure

Please join as a whole congregation across generations to celebrate the mysterious, common, simple-and-yet-complex transformation which is death. If you wish, bring a token of someone who has died, or simply bring a name or thought to add in writing to our tree.

"To the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure."
— [J.K. Rowling \(Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone\)](#)

Welcome

Mugs Johnston, Member of the Board

Prelude

"*Wake from Sleep*" by J. S. Bach
Elsa Garmire, piano

Chalice Lighting (unison affirmation)

*To light our path,
To inspire our dreams,
To warm our hearts,
To anchor our hearths,
We light this chalice.*

Opening Words

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
For it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there

Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference. - Robert Frost

Opening Hymn “*Gathered Here*” #389
(once through, then as a round 3 x)

Story for All

“*The Wild Ride*,” by Sparrow F. Alden, CRE

The Wild Ride
copyright L. F. S. Alden October 31, 2004

Not so very long ago, not so very far away, a young ghost named Eilidh drifted about her family’s farm.

Eilidh’s body had died, and she found she had a great deal to get used to. Eilidh could no longer lift the latch of the wooden kitchen door - her fingers slipped right through it! Then she found that she did not actually have to open the door to go outside to play, she slipped right through the door as well! But Eilidh felt cold, too, and could not put on a sweater or feel the warmth from the sunshine or fireplace.

Eilidh generally stayed near her family’s farmhouse, walking over the ground she had walked over when she was alive. She accompanied her brother when he filled the woodbox. She walked beside her little sister when Susan fed the goats. “I’m sorry I can’t help,” she would say, but they couldn’t hear.

Although Eilidh could not help her family with chores, still she could enjoy the best thing with them. Eilidh still sat beside her grandmother's rocking chair as evening crept over the farm and listened to Granny tell stories. When Eilidh had first died, Granny had told stories about her, and Eilidh liked to listen to them.

As the weeks passed, and her family worked in the field and swam in the pond, Eilidh noticed that she couldn't quite hear as well as she used to; as if her ears were plugged up from a cold, voices sounded muffled and the noises about the farm were unclear. Eilidh couldn't quite see as clearly as she used to. A thin fog had formed around everything she looked at.

"Let's turn the wheel," her father said very early one summer morning, and the whole family joined him in the field to begin the harvest. That night, when the rest of the family feasted on fresh corn, Eilidh could not smell or taste it. She sat beside her little sister that evening, though, watching Susan make dollies out of corn husks and red yarn.

The weeks turned to months, and the fog around things grew thicker. Eilidh had to pay very close attention to watch her mother and Susan putting up the jars and jars of ripe tomatoes and fruit preserves. The colors were not nearly as bright as she had remembered, and she had to spend more and more attention on keeping her self above the floor. She had to strain to hear her mother's voice. "This is how we turn the wheel," Mama told Susan, just as she had explained to Eilidh in years past.

Eilidh was becoming afraid. What if the mist grew and grew until she was all alone in a cloud of cold white silence? Eilidh did not want to be alone.

If she were very close to Granny, though, Eilidh could still listen to the stories in the evening. Granny began again to tell stories about Eilidh herself, and that helped her pay attention. One morning she watched her grandmother in the kitchen mixing, kneading, and baking bread. Granny filled a basket with apples, a small loaf, a piece of cheese wrapped in a napkin, and a few cookies. Susan reached for one of the cookies, and Granny swatted her hand away. "No you don't, Susie, that's for Eilidh!"

Eilidh didn't know what to make of that. She hadn't been able to eat or even touch anything in a very long time, it seemed. Then she saw her brother carving

pumpkins to put on the porch - today was Samhain! Summer's end, that meant, and parading with masks to the neighbors' houses for treats, flickering lights on everyone's front steps, leaving food for the wild riders in the night, and windows shuttered tight well before midnight.

Granny placed that basket on the front porch as Susan and the others came giggling back from their parade. She shooed them all inside, scolding like a mother hen. Then she stood a moment, her knitted shawl pulled about her round shoulders. She spoke softly, so softly that Eilidh could only tell she had spoken by watching her mouth. "Fair travels, Eilidh." Granny turned and stepped into the thick white mist of the house, pulling the heavy wooden door shut behind her.

Fair travels. Eilidh had peeked outside the window in years before on Samhain, seeing darkness and hearing rain, but she had never stepped out after Granny or her parents had shut the doors and windows. Fair travels, Granny had said. Eilidh decided to stay on the porch, at least for a while, and see what there was to see.

She was very curious about the basket of food. She knew she could not pick up an apple, but she reached out her hand and tried anyway. As she had guessed, her fingers slipped through the apple - but she *could* grasp the spirit of the apple! Hungrily she bit, and tasted, and ate the good things her Granny had placed in the basket for her.

Suddenly, Eilidh turned. After weeks of hearing things muffled and distant, she heard one clear sound from the forest, growing louder and louder every second. The sound of baying hounds filled her ears, and soon the thunder of hundreds of hoofbeats followed behind.

The Wild Ride!

Eilidh felt afraid and excited at the same time! Always before, she and her sister and brothers had hidden under covers, safely behind the shutters on Samhain, sound asleep by midnight - or if they did hear some soft noise in the night, Granny or one of her parents sat nearby to quiet them and keep the windows shut. But now! Now, Eilidh was outdoors, out where she would see the Ride!

The hounds raced into view, red-eared dogs running and baying and chasing over hill and farm and countryside. Eilidh saw them as clearly as anything she had ever seen when she was alive - each hound's white fur shining in the moonlight. Then, like some great storm breaking, the riders streamed over the crest of the hill. Horses whose hooves struck sparks, helmeted warriors and long-robed visions and at their head - Eilidh gasped when she saw - the Lord of the Wild.

His wind-paced horse, his long velvet cloak seemed made from the darkness of night itself. In the moonlight, Eilidh could see, clear as day, a great rack of antlers sprouting from his head like a crown. He stood in the stirrups, encouraging his mount to breakneck speed. His eyes grazed the whole country around, and lit on Eilidh. He looked her straight in the eye, as no one had done since she died, and Eilidh heard his deep voice in her heart. "Come, child."

The riders filled the farmyard now with raucous sound and flashing of silver at their stirrups and belts, riding past her like a flood, past the barn, down toward the village. They were passing her by, and Eilidh felt a strange wrench inside her heart; she wanted very much to ride with them, to feel and see and hear again and to feel strong and well - and she wanted to stay with her family.

Fair travels, Granny had said. And Eilidh stepped out, off her porch, toward the Ride. A woman spotted her, rode close to the house, shifted her weight, and extended a strong arm toward Eilidh.

Without even time to say "Goodbye," Eilidh reached up and grasped the hand, solid and strong, and felt herself swung up onto the back of the horse. The horse's body heaved beneath her and the woman before her felt warm as Eilidh held tightly to her middle. She clung desperately and rode like the wind through her village and down the valley. She saw the spirits in the graveyard join the Ride, the spirits of the trees that had fallen, the thousands of animals of field and forest and farm. The Wild Ride raged all night westward over the world.

Hours and hours she rode in thunder and motion, finally seeing a light up ahead toward which the hounds and riders raced. Eilidh turned her face backward, to look her last at the green Earth - now white with thick mist. Finally, finally, the horse flashed through a gate, wheeled, and stopped. Eilidh felt herself lifted and set down shakily on the ground by the gate. The horses blew and stamped all around her and

she felt the eyes of the riders upon her. Still she stared backward at Earth, and felt cold tears stream down her cheeks.

Silence finally fell. A warm hand touched her shoulder. A deep voice sounded near her ear. "Child," he said, "turn the wheel."

She reached out and touched the mist. She drew it like a curtain across the gateway. And she felt sunshine on her shoulders.

Offertory Hymn

"The Earth, Water, Fire, Air" #387

Homily

"The Next Great Adventure"

Sparrow F. Alden, CRE

For my readers on Birch Island Books, this is the song which inspired this whole service: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzNp7Sl_Sel

Calendar Stuff:

I hope you all have looked over your notes from last February 1 - I got to lead a service about the Celtic holy day of Imbolc. That's the day of reaching through to your own inner landscape, and contemplating the seeds lying under the snow, a holy day of letting your dreams grow.

Welcome to Samhain.

It is a different landscape we approach in this season, not the inner world, but the afterworld.

Samhain means "end of summer" in Gàidhlig. It is the word from the old agrarian calendar given to that month which begins on the night when the Pleiades reach their zenith at midnight.

I have homework for those of you who are up early - if you are an up late sort of family, you may do this after 8PM in December. Find Orion in a clear sparkling darkness. Find his great bow. It is aiming, point-blank, at Taurus xx. Look for the small V of stars which are the base of his great horns. There's a smattering of sparkles (or a pleasant little haze, if you forgot your glasses) just to the right, near his shoulder or near his heart - those are the Pleiades.

The night on which they reach their highest point at midnight was exactly halfway between the autumn equinox and the winter solstice, about a thousand, two thousand years ago. Remember the magic of "the spaces between" - after all, your glasses are not lost right on top of one of the couch cushions.

The crops are in. The frost is on the pumpkin. In a Gaelic-speaking community, the last farmer to have his hay bound and stored earned the nickname of "Winter" for the year. The woman to bind that sheaf was called the Wolf.

Summer was definitely gone.

Along came a monk who said, "Oh, the real name for this day is 'October 31'! The real name for the month following is 'November'. You call it 'Samhain'? OK, in my glossary I'm making November = Samhain, and since you folks end the day when the sun goes *down*, then when the sun goes down on October 31, that's Samhain."

Then we jumped from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar, and the progression of the stars means that the Pleiades' culmination has changed... and now we celebrate the arrival of Samhain on October 31st.

But I was going to say, before Truth broke in with all her matter-of-fact about the calendar...

The food is in. The hunting is good. The wood is stacked. The beer's in the barrel. You are as wealthy now as you're going to be all year. If you owe someone a pound of flour, you can pay it now. A half-cord of wood from when they helped your Mom out last April.

And you accept the payments that your neighbors owe you. They are as wealthy now as they will be all year. Therefore tomorrow, Samhain, is the Celtic new year. Everything is settled, clean slate.

And if someone cannot pay you back for Samhain, they're never going to be able to pay you back. As beings who live in community, we have learned this wisdom: don't hold the debt between you past a year. Forgive them, and let it go.

If you can't pay a debt, ask forgiveness now, before Samhain. If the debt is not mundane - if it's a debt of honor, or of the heart, ask forgiveness now.

I invite you to celebrate Samhain with me - before sundown tomorrow, clean your desk, do the tiny things on your to-do-list and get clarity on the bigger things, catch up on your bills, do your bookkeeping, call your brother, say you're sorry, return a favor, thank someone for their generosity and pay it in kind - and pass it forward. That's called "interest". Forgive someone - and really forgive them. Let it go.

If there were hard words between you and your neighbor, your spouse, your kinsman, forgive them. And let it go.

And if they have died. Whether there was unresolved pain between you, or whether you just miss them with a blinding hole in your heart, forgive them, and let them go.

In fact, light their way with your blessing and your turnip lantern. Give the wee ghosts the food that will sustain them on the journey as they parade westward through your community.

Where are they going? West. Where the sun goes. Maybe that's where summer went. Summerland, we'll call it. What's it like? We don't know. That's why it's an adventure!

I have had wonderful parents ask me what to say when kids ask what happens after death. "Tell the truth," I always say. "I don't know what happens." "Then that's the truth." That is our story as Unitarian Universalists. Relying on science and

reason... we don't know. Isn't that awesome? It is a huge, beautiful, awe-inspiring mystery! For folks who are dying, it's their Next Great Adventure!

(check time)

What is your Next Great Adventure?

Not rhetorical!

(congregation input)

If no takers:

Are any of you doing [National Novel Writing Month?](#)

It's my next great adventure, thirty days and nights of literary abandon!

A fifty-thousand-word novel in one month!

Who's with me?

I'm going to pack coffee, a newly-system-restored laptop, plenty of frozen lasagna and a barrel of apples.

What would you pack on your Great Adventure?

(congregation input)

Our congregation's Great Adventure is right now! What are we becoming through this Adventure called interim ministry? We will need Fair Trade coffee for the adventure, some principles, a solid covenant to hold one another to communicating respectfully and kindly. Note the emphasis, please, it's easy to agree to listen deeply and speak to good purpose; the challenge is to hold each other to that social contract. If the UUCUV can do it, then the next adventure after this? Is a completely wide-open unknown Adventure.

Learning from our ancestors and the wisdom of all the world's religions, we see that it is wise to even to pack for the Great Adventure which is death.

What were Egyptian Pharaohs supplied with for the adventure into the afterlife?
Or Viking warriors?

(check time)

(congregation input)

In Ireland, folks have found bodies of ancient Celtic warriors who died suddenly but not accidentally, buried with their weapons in their thick sheepskin cloaks, in the bogs between settled lands.

These aren't the honorable, dry-land burial mounds of kings or important people or most warriors. These are the bog-bodies.

I watched the National Geographic special on Bog Bodies with great interest - and the anthropological archaeologists went to great convoluted feats of logic to explain why warriors who had apparently lived and fought well and had some personal wealth were buried in these dangerous, swampy, scary places. Maybe they'd fallen out of favor with the chieftan?

I have a different theory.

We normal warriors can take care of the threats which come running over the dry land, the O'Neills and the cattle-raiders, we can go whack at each other with our shillelaghs, no problem.

But the scary things. The ghosts and the will-o-the-wisps and night terrors from a different world. We living folk feel powerless against them. Let us send one of our warriors through the veil, on to that Next Great Adventure, to fight in that afterworld for the clan and kin he loves. We give him a warm cloak, good weapons, our love in return.

CLOSING

Prepared for the Next Great Adventure. Prepared for Transformation.

Will you become a novelist in the month of Samhain? A runner? A student at [Mythgard Institute?](#)

What will you pack for your adventure? That's your homework - I am a religious educator, you know - I challenge you to pack something symbolic of your next

adventure. A compass or a tin whistle or an extra toothbrush in your purse. Tell your subconscious “I’m ready for an adventure!” Even the Fool in the Tarot deck has his lunch over his shoulder.

As always, I am eager to learn about your adventures. May the road lie smooth before you.

(9:35)

A few words on honoring the ancestors

Some people have brought mementos this morning, objects symbolic of people they have loved who have died. I can make bread in this bowl, store apples in this bowl, pick it up and wipe the counter under it any day of the week. By placing it - or by you placing your mementos - on our altar, in sacred time, in a reverent manner, we change ourselves and open ourselves to communicate through the veil with our loved ones. The gesture says, “I remember *this* about you. I honor you. I love you.” Our altar will remain in place during coffee hour; you can privately retrieve your memento at that time, or let it be a spark of conversation between you and a friend over coffee.

You have found colored leaf squares at your seats, I hope, and eensy pencils? Feel free to use your own pen or one of the crayons. If you wish, you can write the name of someone who has died, or many someones. You can write a message to them, a memory, a poem. We have yarn to pass out with which to tie your leaves to these trees, any one of them, and we have helpers to do the tying for you if you like. These trees will be burned in a bonfire tomorrow night, sending your messages up to heaven or the ancestors or the clouds. If it is unsafe to get a burn permit tomorrow, they will wait and be burned on the Winter Solstice, the longest night.

We will prepare ourselves by writing in silence, by breathing deeply, and sharing a hymn. We'll move in a clockwise manner, as the sun teaches us, using the stairs or ramp as appropriate.

First write, then join the breathing, then with one voice we will sing.

Hymn

"I've Got Peace Like a River" #100

Samhain Procession

Musical Benediction

"Deep Peace," an ancient Gaelic blessing,
arranged by Gwynth Walker, 2007

Shared by Kathy Christie and Mardy High, vocalists

We are grateful for your presence in worship today where we honor our own transformations and those of our ancestors. We appreciate everyone who participates in the ministry of this congregation.

Today we especially recognize: greeters Kathy Christie and Debbie Aliber; and coffee hour hosts Debbie Aliber, Kathy Christie, and Babette Hansen.

Please use the baskets on the snack table to return your writing implements.