

Beyond the now demolished medieval wall and gate of Porta a' Pinti, just outside the historical center of Firenze, or Florence, I found myself standing at the gate of the English Cemetery. The sign on the gate stated the summer hours were from 3:00 – 6:00. It was 2:00. I had tickets for 3:30 entry to the Uffizi Museum. This was my only opportunity and so remembering a comment shared about the hours posted being akin to the speed limits posted on the Italian highways, a mere suggestion, and that a couple of Euros would gain entrance anytime, I rang the bell.

A cheerful voice came across the intercom. I explained my situation and mentioned that I am a Unitarian minister. The gate slowly swung open and I was greeted by the caretaker, a gentle woman with the cheerful voice I'd heard on the intercom.

The English Cemetery is Swiss Property, the land having been purchased in 1827 by the Swiss Evangelical Reformed Church as an international and ecumenical cemetery. Until this time non-Catholic or non-Jewish individuals who died in Florence were buried in Livorno some 100 kilometers away. In 1877, the Cemetery had to be closed, the medieval wall having been torn down when Florence became capital of Italy, and Code Napoleon, from Roman law, forbidding burials within city limits was enforced.

In the 50 years it was in use, the cemetery received the remains of men, women and children from all over the world – from Canada and Russia, the last descendants of William Shakespeare and (NA – DEZ – DA) Nadezhda De Santis, a black Nubian slave brought to Florence at age fourteen, many known and unknown individuals rest there. The most famous tomb is that of poetess, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. I had come though to pay homage to, as was stated on the entrance plaque “the great American Preacher, Theodore Parker.”

I was grateful that in a conversation with that a ministerial friend prior to my leaving for Europe, he had mentioned the English Cemetery for I had forgotten that Theodore Parker was buried in Florence. Parker was the topic of a number of papers I'd written. He is for me a hero. He was the first Unitarian minister to offer a time for children. He broke with Unitarian orthodoxy of his time being a strong social justice advocate, primarily for the abolitionist movement and a supporter of women suffrage efforts as well.

Conservative Unitarian clergy of his day labeled him a heretic. He was ostracized, denied access to Unitarian pulpits and journals and efforts were made to eject him from The Boston Association of Unitarian Ministers. He refused to resign from his small Unitarian congregation and they stood with him. Parker regarded acting according to one's conscience as a religious activity. This understanding led him to become more and more guided to social activism.

My thoughts for this morning though inspired by this event on my summer vacation, is not about the life and theology of one of my heroes. It is rather about the visceral response I had from being in that place, the recognition of it as an unexpected pilgrimage and some of the understanding gleaned thus far as I continue to open up to the insights offered in that moment, a rare moment of worth and value.

I recognize it as a moment of worth because my whole self was involved. From the moment the gate swung open there was a sense of something significant, something of value contained in the experience. There was simultaneously a sense of peace and unrest

and I felt a smile on my face as my eyes welled over with tears. I was surprised and awed at my response.

I tried to give the soft spoken caretaker, Elizabeth, a few Euros, as both an expression of my gratitude for being welcomed in and also following the suggestion, what I figured was correct protocol. She would not accept my offering, instead gave me a laminated map of the cemetery grounds, pointing out Theodore Parker's resting place and also noted a number of others that would be of interest to me. I recognized none of the names she mentioned but nodded appreciatively for the information and began to walk the pathways, reading names, noting ages, so many were very young.

Then I came to Parker's burial site, a tombstone with his likeness carved on it & the words: **HIS NAME IS ENGRAVED IN MARBLE/ HIS VIRTUES IN THE HEARTS OF THOSE HE HELPED TO FREE FROM SLAVERY/ AND SUPERSTITION.**

As I stood there, memories of Parker's life floated to my consciousness, the fire of his commitment and the fragility of his health. I had read the biographies, the sermons and the treaties yet here in this place there was something incredibly concrete, tangible almost and an intimacy. I felt a connection to that fire of commitment, like something in me seemed to crack open and I felt a sort of welcoming. This sense of being opened and welcomed is a common aspect of how I feel when experiencing what I would call a sacred moment.

Now as significant as standing before the monument to a hero was for me, and perhaps only because of the experience I had there, was I opened, softened and vulnerable enough to be aware when an even deeper gift was presented. Elizabeth, the caretaker, had been gracious enough when we met, though somewhat aloof. When I came to return the map though, she looked at me, appeared to recognize my openness and asked if I wanted to see the library and the work she is doing. She unlocked the doors and we passed into the Private area and there were books, written by or about people interned in the cemetery.

And there were amazing photographs, not old yellowed and preserved photos. These were recent, the faces incredibly alive, portraits that showed a depth of sorrow and mischievous zeal, a photo study of gypsies. They had been allowed into Italy and were not allowed to work, begging their only option. Their plight not particularly publicized, rather hidden. They are invisible people, each face a rich story. And this gentle woman was teaching them to read and write. She is arranging apprenticeships for them to learn to restore and maintain the marble tombstones. She does this with the vision that they will have a vocation - that gypsies will become caretakers of marble.

When we left the library and returned to the office it was as though we had left a sanctuary, a haven, a place of both safety and possibility. Elizabeth then let me make a contribution to the maintenance of the cemetery. She told me of her work to manage and restore it. The only maintenance for years had been via toxic weed killers. It then took years of her insistence to have them stop that practice. She expressed her joy that some of the very old, 100 year old roots of vines had survived and were growing again. Resurrection right there, right now, in the cemetery.

I don't know if I have ever met such a gentle spirit. I do know that she has left a mark on me, that she lives a life of significance. Meeting her was an unexpected blessing, a gift and an inspiration.

My visit to the English Cemetery in Firenze was an unexpected pilgrimage. Unexpected Pilgrimage may seem like an oxymoron in that the term pilgrimage most often refers to a journey taken with great intention and purpose rather than an unexpected moment. It was the unexpected quality of this experience that turned it for me from a visit to another cemetery to an unexpected pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage is *a journey to a special place* and that was true, though the uniqueness of this particular situation keeps unfolding new depths of meaning the more I reflect upon it. It is the other meaning applied to pilgrimage as *a long journey or search of great moral significance*, that seems more poignant.

In her book *Crossing to Avalon: A Woman's Midlife Pilgrimage*, Jean Shinoda Bolen suggests that: "life is not only a journey but a pilgrimage or quest as well. When we experience sacred moments it often is not so much a matter of our outer geography but of finding soulful places within ourselves."

This sense of quest or pilgrimage, the search for moral significance, is personal internal work and yet there is a collective aspect to it that draws us into community in the search. It is the kind of personal work that requires being in relationship with the other.

Theodore Parker's life has moral significance because of how he chose to use it, to touch lives, to live justice into the world. Elizabeth the cemetery caretaker's life has moral significance because of how she chooses to live it, touching lives and living justice into the world. She seems to live from a soul-filled place and meeting her was for me a sacred moment and an invitation to a soulful place within myself.

Then of course comes the challenge, am I living a life of moral significance? This is one of those big questions in life, one that as a thinking and compassionate person I am compelled to ask. It is one of the questions that motivate me to seek out a community to share in the search for the answer, to afford a place to live out a life of significance.

It is said that ours is a faith of deeds not creeds – if this is the case and I believe it to be so then I am called to reflect on my deeds, how I live my life, day to day. I am challenged to ask myself if mine is a life of worth, a journey of significance, does my life have meaning and value. In asking these questions I am reminded again and again of the importance of community, that I am not alone on this journey. When we recognize that we are not alone on the journey there is a quality of life possible that would not be alone. This is an important reason for our coming together, the search for meaning and value and sharing it.

Here in this congregation we come to share the moments of personal insight. We come to be held in love as we struggle with understanding life's challenges and circumstance, to explore the big questions of life. We come as fellow sojourners seeking to enact justice and find meaning in the world.

Thomas Merton said "The geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey. The inner journey is the interpolation of the meaning and signs of the outer pilgrimage. One can have one without the other: it is best to have both."

I have taken some of the key insights from my visit to the English cemetery and applied them to our coming together in that search for meaning and value. Key insights include: the Fire of Commitment; the willingness to risk being vulnerable; and the importance of patience and insistence.

First the Fire of commitment ~ We are rooted in a history; a tradition filled with exemplars of lives lived with dedication and faith in the potential for human good and understanding. Lives lived with love and compassion as the fuel for commitment. As individuals and as a community we strive to be seekers of justice and agents of change. We ask ourselves if we are doing all we can, if there is energy enough for the great work there is to do. We want to do this work in the streets so to speak though not there alone for change requires advocacy and insistence.

This is the work particularly of the Social Responsibility committee in any congregation and also individual and collective acts of justice making. It touches my heart to see the young children here today walking justice, learning by doing that their lives make a difference; they are on a pilgrimage this morning.

It is as important to advocate and as it is to participate. I remember when I was an intern minister in North Vancouver, ordering a cake for the new member recognition Sunday and requesting a chalice design. The baker at the Safeway store said while she was capable of doing the sample design I provided, store policy was to use only designs in the book. There were crosses and stars of David, no chalices. I asked to speak with the manager and made claim that the symbol for my religious tradition ought to be an option and that this is a matter of justice. We had a cake with a chalice. A small act of justice-making, we all do many as we live our lives with integrity.

People asking for fair trade products have resulted in increased availability, heck even the corner store have fair trade coffee now – and that is from our pressuring for it to be so. What else can we do? The demand for justice and equity in human relations has resulted in the legal right to marry for same sex couples in this country. What else can we do? We are each of us agents of justice, accepting the responsibility inherent in this agency.

Whenever we extend a caring hand or enact a thoughtful action, our life has moral significance because of how we choose to live it, touching lives and living justice into the world. Whenever we extend a caring hand to welcome a new person into community, we find a place for the stranger to become first a guest and then a member. Each of us may feel the stranger at times yet here there is the continuing possibility of welcoming companions on the journey.

The willingness to risk being vulnerable - It is a risky thing to open oneself, to be vulnerable; it is courageous to come into a new community and requires intention for the community to remain open to the other. It is courageous to return to a community and strive to go deeper, to heal the misunderstandings and frustrations inevitable in human interaction, and honour the incredible gift of being related. It is courageous to be sure that your voice is heard and to listen deeply to the voices that you may not agree with. There is ever the potential for greater understanding of the other and acceptance of differences.

There was a resonance for me when I read the new member welcome from another UU congregation that says: *"What is this church? It is not the building, except to the extent*

that we have chosen it and made it ours and adorned it with the fruits of our time, treasure and talents. It is not the minister, except to the extent that we have called him or her to inspire and guide our spiritual lives. It is not the music, except to the extent that we make it when we blend our voices together to produce sounds lovelier than any one of us could make alone. It is not even the beliefs, for we Unitarian Universalists have no single unifying belief -- only the combined beliefs of each one of us. This church is the people. Without me, without you, this church is nothing. It does not exist. Buildings may fall down, ministers may retire, music may go out of tune, and beliefs may falter. No matter. We are this church. Without us it is nothing, but with us, it can be ANYTHING." UU Church of South County, Mission Viejo, CA by member Gila Jones

The possibility of being anything is for me a window for visioning what might be possible. Focusing on the church as the people rather than the building is at the heart of a congregation, even while the demands of the building may pull an inordinate amount of energy.

The idea of a pilgrimage, a journey of significance, is an individual and a communal experience, a personal and even a denominational journey.

The CUC ACM held in Ottawa last May stirred in me a sense that we are currently on the cusp of such a vision, of opening to change and necessity for growth. The growth I refer to here is a quality of deepening our commitment and action. How will this will manifest itself in the coming year is up to all of us.

Finally patience and insistence – there is so much to be done, so much that could be done. I challenge myself and all of us as a community of faith and hope to be patient and insistent. Patient with each other, patient with the systems of change that seem to move so slowly, patient with ourselves as fallible beings. I invite us to be insistent with each other, for others often see our gifts and shining qualities more clearly than we can ourselves. Be insistent with this community to rise to our greatest expectations of what is possible for us. Be insistent as an active agent of justice in the world.

Unitarian Minister Ralph Waldo Emerson said... "To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded." Let us acknowledge our own successes and name the communal ones.

As I continue to reflect on this story, inspired as I have been by the lives that touched mine in the English cemetery, I recognize that the significance is visible when it is mirrored out in the world and when I have the patience to look at the reflection and gain the unexpected rare moments of insight and worth. I look in your eyes and see reflected there possibility and trust, then we recognize life as a pilgrimage, a journey of significance. This understanding of a shared journey requires faith and hope. Here we find that, in each others company we find unexpected rare moments of insight and worth.

To close these reflections I offer these words from Theodore Parker.

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;
It's temple, all space;
Its shrine the good heart;
its creed, all truth; its ritual, works of love;
its profession of faith, divine living.