

The Center of the World

*Sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered September 16, 2018
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Several years ago, right after I graduated from seminary, I spent a year working at the former Unitarian Universalist Association headquarters, at 25 Beacon Street in Boston. My assignment was the Interim Administrator for the Office of International Relations for the UUA, which was created a few years prior by then UUA President Rev. John Buehrens. For the first several years, it was run by Rev. Ken MacLean, but Ken was retiring and Rev. Buehrens and the UUA Board had to find a successor. They did, but the new director would not be able to begin her work for about a year, so I was hired as Interim; or, as a cynic might have said, to essentially keep the seat warm for a year. I was fresh out of seminary and knew very little about the UUA's international relations, and even less about the business and politics that took place in that old stately headquarters building back east (the UUA moved to its new location on Farnsworth Street in Boston a few years ago.) But I was eager and ready to learn, and spent that year mainly keeping communications alive with various UU-related groups around the world. I wasn't given the opportunity to travel to exotic places like Transylvania or the Philippines or India or any place in which some form of Unitarian Universalism is practiced, but through email, snail mail, phone, and occasional visits by others to Boston, I met a lot of interesting people while warming that chair.

One of them was a man named Hanumanthra Susarla, a kind and gentle 65-year-old who lived in the city of Hyderabad in central India. About a week prior to his visit, Hanumanthra phoned from Salt Lake City, Utah, and asked if he could please speak to the UUA President, Rev. John

Buehrens. Alas, Rev. Buehrens was unavailable that day, so it fell to me, the Interim Administrator of the International Office, to take the call from this man from India.

As was often the case when I received phone calls in that job, language was a challenge. Although Hanumanthra did speak English, his heavy accent was made more intense by what was obviously incredible excitement as he explained on the phone how excited he was to be in America, visiting his son, and how he was planning to come to Boston the following Thursday and wanted to meet with the UUA President so he could talk about his idea of starting a UU church in Hyderabad. I did manage to explain to him that Rev. Buehrens would not be available to see him that day, but he was thrilled to be speaking to a live person nonetheless. I hung up the phone unsure of much of what we had talked about, but quite sure of two things: that this man from India, who called himself a Unitarian, was coming to visit the next Thursday, and that he was so excited that for him, this was the opportunity of a lifetime. I think he was flying from Salt Lake City to Boston just for this visit. For me, it seemed like just another appointment to put down in my calendar. I wasn't even sure I had gotten his name right.

The following Thursday came, and as I said, it was a most interesting visit. I had planned on doing with him most of the usual things I did with visitors to that stately old headquarters on venerable Beacon Hill in Boston. I would take him on a tour of our facilities pointing out all the portraits of people like William Ellery Channing, Frederick May Eliot, and Transylvanian Bishop Joseph Ferenoz. I would show him our bookstore and give him a complimentary copy of Rev. Buehrens book, *Our Chosen Faith*.

I would cordially introduce him to some of our more visible staff people. And I would take him out for a nice lunch and a tour of some of the historical sites in downtown Boston. At the appointed hour the receptionist, Arlene, buzzed my office and told me that my visitor was here. I went downstairs to greet him, and within the first minute of meeting Hanumanthra, I realized that my plans for the day were woefully inadequate.

By the time I arrived in the lobby to greet him, Arlene told me, he had already stood on the front steps and blessed the building, and had offered a prayer for Arlene as well. He greeted me with open arms, a wide smile, and a sparkle in his eye. I immediately motioned for him to come inside, but he stood firm. “Before I come in”, he said, “I must offer a prayer for this sacred building and for our time together.” He took both my hands tightly, and began to pray in a solemn and humble voice that touched my heart deeply. I could not understand many of his words, but his sentiment was clear: Our time together was to be sacred time.

After his prayers, our embrace, and our greeting, while we still stood in the entryway to the headquarters building of the Unitarian Universalist Association, he told me how pleased he was to be here, how for many years he’s been anticipating this visit to the world headquarters of the UUA, and how he humbly came in the spirit of service and prayer to experience firsthand the wonder of God’s holy work as it transpires in this sacred place. It was not so much his words that told me all this, but I could see it in his eyes. I suddenly felt as if I were standing in the center of the world, the center of the universe and all God’s creation. That was when I realized that my plans – a tour, some paintings, a free book and lunch – were

entirely inadequate. I stood motionless for a few moments, trying to figure out how I could return his greeting in a way that would approach a mutual coming together, but nothing seemed right. Asking him to come in for a cup of coffee, showing him our lobby portrait of William Ellery Channing, or even giving him an entire shopping spree in the UUA bookstore, all seemed way too pedestrian. Then it occurred to me exactly what I should do: I showed him the horseshoe.

That's right – the horseshoe.

You may be wondering what I mean by “the horseshoe”, and if you are, I'm glad. For this is a piece of UUA folklore, if I may call it that, that is not well enough known, in my opinion. Some weeks before Hanumanthra's visit, I heard a story from the UUA's then Vice President of Development, Bob Snow, who had one day noticed an inconspicuous horseshoe hanging above the door at the main entrance to the building. He knew of the old folk wisdom that held that a horseshoe hanging above a door would bring good luck to all who entered, but he thought it was kind of odd at our ornate and luxurious headquarters. After all, he mused, the building was dedicated in 1927 by the American Unitarian Association, which at the time was something of a club for the “Boston Brahmin”: the well-educated elite of the standing order. The building reflects such a culture, with its prestigious address and high-brow architecture, and a horseshoe over the door simply didn't fit. Further, Bob thought it was odd that our Unitarian forebears, with their reputations as skeptical rationalists, would invoke a folk superstition such as this in their headquarters building.

So Bob did some research, calling some of the past UUA Presidents and retired field staff. After several phone calls, he found one person who

knew how the horseshoe came to be there. It was put there, he was told, by Ashton Crutchfield. Who was Ashton Crutchfield? Bob asked. Ashton Crutchfield, it turns out, was the janitor for the American Unitarian Association for almost fifty years, from around 1900 to 1950. It was he, the custodian of that stately palace, who apparently saw a need to place a token of good luck over the door through which many of the most well-off and over-educated Boston elite walked through each morning and afternoon. Perhaps this palace of high-brow thought and rationalistic religion really was, and maybe still is, in need of such a token of good luck. Through all of our well-thought-out skeptical dismissals of superstition and magic, perhaps we have been blessed by the action of one man in a way that all our libraries and discussion groups and sermons (!) could never explain. Perhaps this horseshoe has brought good fortune to us in a way that we could never bring to ourselves.

I know it did for me that Thursday when I stood, dumbstruck, with a holy and gracious man who had come from halfway around the world to feel the blessings of a religious community he yearned to call home. I showed Hanumanthra the horseshoe, explained that it was a symbol of luck and fortune, and he bowed before it, kissed his hands and motioned in its direction, and prayed.

“This,” he said, without a touch of irony or skepticism, “will bring us good fortune today.”

And indeed I believe it did. We talked for over three hours that afternoon – straight through lunch – and prayed and chanted and embraced a number of times. Hanumanthra explained to me that he is a Hindu by birth, and still is a Hindu, but had discovered Unitarianism as it is

practiced in the remote villages of the Khasi Hills in northeast India. He felt their practice emphasizing the oneness of God, the dignity of the individual, and the unity of humanity was a perfect complement to the religion of his people. Over the years, he told me, he had made a number of trips to the Khasi Hills – the largest community of Unitarians outside of North America and Europe – and had a dream of starting a new Unitarian church within the liberal Hindu communities of central India. This was some twenty years ago, and I don't know if he has had any success in this endeavor to not. But one thing I do know is if Hanumanthra lacked anything to make it possible, it certainly was not passion.

But it's time for me to come clean. I didn't come here to talk today about India or Boston or any other place halfway around the world. I came here to talk about what is going on right here, right now, in this sacred place that is the Kittitas Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation. But I digressed with that story about my visitor from India some twenty years ago because it is entirely relevant to what is going on here. Hanumathra taught me things that all my professors in seminary and mentors in the UU world could never have taught me.

Hanumanthra didn't care that our meeting was not likely to be the beginning of a long-lasting relationship, or that I would likely soon move on to another position and we might not ever cross paths again. No, what mattered to him – what he taught me so well – was the simple fact that our time together, however brief, was sacred time. Sacred because we chose to make it so.

He also taught me to be ready – for you just don't know when some routine appointment with someone with whom you are planning to be

cordial and polite but are not anticipating a life-altering experience, just might turn out to be more the latter than the former. Every person who walks through that door on Sunday mornings has a story of his or her own; and we don't know as we offer our hand in greetings and give them an Order of Service whether that person is just curious or is in the midst of a life-changing experience, and your hand might be part of that experience.

I also told this story this morning to remind us of what sacred time really is, or can be. Maybe it's been a long time since a visitor has come here from halfway around the world to say a prayer for unity and to try to build a bridge to another culture. But people do walk in that door week after week, people who may have no logical reason to get out of bed and drive halfway across town, but still they come. Still we come. Maybe we don't come reciting ancient prayers or chants, but we come with open hearts and open minds. We come looking for something, hungry for something – maybe something so ephemeral that we may not know what it is. Maybe we really come to be blessed by a horseshoe that was hung above our door by an anonymous forebear many years ago. We come in hope, that our lives may be transformed; we come in faith, that there is something beyond a short and shallow existence; we come in love, yearning to feel and be felt in the most authentic way by those in our community.

In short, we come to be here – to what is, in this moment, the center of the world. For that is where we are in this given place and time. Even if that is not literally true, we can make it so by the way we act and feel about this congregation and our ministries here. We can make this the center of the world by choosing to greet every visitor as if he or she did indeed come

from halfway around the world – because in many cases that may not be far from the truth. We can make this the center of the world by stopping to remember that our time together is sacred time – because loving, respectful, and authentic engagements with other people is one of the most precious things in the world. And we can make this the center of the world by making the commitment that this place, these people, this congregation can be the light of the world. By being together in this religious community we are expressing the hope that our visions – both individual and collective – really can find a home in the world; and that by acting in faith we can make a difference in our community. But to do this we must take ourselves seriously – we must learn to live as if this were the center of the world.

And we must find our horseshoe. For this to be the center of the world, we'll need a little luck and good fortune to come our way. Perhaps our horseshoe is already here – perhaps it's been here for seventy-five years and we just haven't noticed it. But the horseshoe is where we meet, standing under the threshold with our visitors from half a world away, to find a sense of common purpose and understanding. The horseshoe brings a little magic to a community already blessed with love, compassion, and commitment, the kind of magic that Clara sees at the Van Gogh Café. Each morning when we light a chalice as a symbol of hope and truth, we are, in effect, calling on our horseshoe to transform this place from an assembly of individuals to a community of faith. A religious community that has hope, a vision, and faith that our time and place of coming together is sacred.

And finally, to do this, we must know, honor, and respect our past, the history that brought us here today. Those individuals, those groups of

people, those small moments of interchange in which creative work is done, all contribute to who we are as a community this day. Those Ashton Crutchfields who hung a horseshoe over our door half a century ago. Who we want to be is useless without knowing where we've come from. The past is not always what we'd want it to be, but that is okay. For this congregation to be the center of the world, we have to know and honor everything and everybody that brought us to where we are, and made us who we are. Much of it will be easy to take pride in, some of it may be difficult to own; all of it makes the ground on which we stand.

If the horseshoe is not a perfectly fitting analogy of what makes us religious, then perhaps I can put it more bluntly and say that we must remember that we are not just a social club but a community of faith. Our faith is that spark of divine inspiration that gives us the courage to dream, and the hope that our dreams can come alive. Our collective faith is fed by each of your spirits coming alive, risking change, and daring to dream. With this faith, our collective ministry truly will have no borders.

May the blessings of all our ancestors be felt among us, and may our hearts meet in that sacred space where our dreams become real.

And, maybe we'll be blessed with a little luck and good fortune on the way.



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