

“Meeting Our Edge”  
A Sermon by Susan Madison, Membership Coordinator  
July 26, 2009

FIRST READING

Our first reading this morning is written by Pema Chodron and is taken from her book *The Path of Lovingkindness*. Pema Chodron, you may remember, is an American Buddhist nun. She is a resident teacher at an abbey in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, the first Tibetan monastery in North America established for Westerners. The reading is entitled “The Wisdom of No Escape.

“There is a story about a group of people climbing to the top of a mountain. It turns out its pretty steep, and as soon as they get up to a certain height, a couple of people look down and see how far it is, and they completely freeze; they had come up against their edge and they couldn’t go beyond it. The fear was so great that they couldn’t move.

Other people tripped on ahead, laughing and talking, but as the climb got steeper and [scarier], more people began to get scared and freeze. All the way up this mountain there were places where people met their edge and just froze and couldn’t go any farther. The people who made it to the top looked out and were very happy to have made it.

The moral of the story is that it really doesn’t make any difference where you meet your edge; just meeting it is the point. Life is a whole journey of meeting your edge again and again. That’s where you are challenged; that’s where, if you’re a person who wants to live, you start to ask yourself questions like, “Now, why am I so scared? What is it that I don’t want to see? Why can’t I go any further than this?”

The people who got to the top were not the heroes of the day. It’s just that they weren’t afraid of heights; they are going to meet their edge somewhere else. The ones who froze at the bottom were not the losers. They simply stopped first and so their lesson came earlier than the others. However, sooner or later everybody meets his or her edge.

SECOND READING

Our second reading is from *Let Your Life Speak* by educator Parker Palmer. It is entitled “The Way to God is Down.”

I had always imagined God to be in the same general direction as everything else that I valued: up. I had failed to appreciate the meaning of some words that had intrigued me since I first heard them in seminary—Tillich’s description of God as the “ground of being”. I had to be forced underground before I could understand that the way to God is not up but down. . . . .

Here is a small story from my life about why one might want to take the journey [inward and downward]. In my early forties, I decided to go on the program called Outward Bound. I was on the edge of my first depression, a fact I knew only dimly at the time, and I thought Outward Bound might be a place to shake up my life and learn some things I needed to know.

In the middle of that week, I faced the challenge I feared most. One of our instructors backed me up to the edge of a cliff 110 feet above solid ground. He tied a very thin rope to my waist—a rope that looked ill-kempt to me and seemed to be starting to unravel—and told me to start “rappelling” down that cliff.

“Do what?” I asked.

“Just go!” The instructor explained, in typical Outward Bound fashion.

## SECOND READING continued

So I went—and immediately slammed into a ledge, some four feet down from the edge of the cliff, with bone-jarring, brain-jarring force.

The instructor looked down at me: “I don’t think you’ve quite got it.”

“Right,” said I, being in no position to disagree. “So what am I supposed to do?”

“The only way to do this,” he said, “is to lean back as far as you can. You have to get your body at right angles to the cliff so that your weight will be on your feet. It’s counterintuitive, but it’s the only way that works.”

I knew that he was wrong, of course. I knew that the trick was to hug the mountain, to stay as close to the rock face as I could. So I tried it again, my way—and slammed into the next ledge, another four feet down.

“You still don’t have it,” the instructor said helpfully.

“OK,” I said, “tell me again what I’m supposed to do.”

“Lean way back,” said he, “and take the next step.”

The next step was a very big one, but I took it—and wonder of wonders, it worked. I leaned back into empty space, eyes fixed on the heavens in prayer, made tiny, tiny moves with my feet, and started descending down the rock face, gaining confidence with every step.

I was about halfway down when the second instructor called up from below: “Parker, I think you’d better stop and see what’s just below your feet.” I lowered my eyes very slowly—so as not to shift my weight—and saw that I was approaching a deep hole in the face of the rock.

To get down, I would have to get around that hole, which meant I could not maintain the straight line of descent I had started to get comfortable with. I would need to change course and swing myself around that hole, to the left or to the right. I knew for a certainty that attempting to do so would lead directly to my death—so I froze, paralyzed with fear.

The second instructor let me hang there, trembling, in silence, for what seemed like a very long time. Finally, she shouted up these helpful words: “Parker, is anything wrong?”

To this day, I do not know where my words came from though I have twelve witnesses to the fact that I spoke them. In a high, squeaky voice, I said, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Then,” said the second instructor, “it’s time that you learned the Outward Bound motto.”

“Oh, keen,” I thought. “I’m about to die, and she’s going to give me a motto!”

But then she shouted ten words I hope never to forget, words whose impact and meaning I can still feel: “If you can’t get out of it, get into it!”

I had long believed in the concept of “the word become flesh,” but until that moment, I had not experienced it. My teacher spoke words so compelling that they bypassed my mind, went into my flesh, and animated my legs and feet. No helicopter would come to rescue me; the instructor on the cliff would not pull me up with the rope; there was no parachute in my backpack to float me to the ground. There was no way out of my dilemma except to get into it—so my feet started to move, and in a few minutes I made it safely down.

Why would anyone want to embark on the daunting inner journey? Because there is no way out of one’s inner life, so one had better get into it. On the inward and downward spiritual journey, the only way out is in and through.

# “Meeting Our Edge”

A Sermon by Susan Madison, Membership Coordinator

July 26, 2009

Katheryn Hepburn once said, “If you aren’t living on the edge, you’re taking up too much room!” I suspect her reference to the “edge” was a little different from the ones I will speak of this morning, but it is true that the edge is where we most often meet life at its fullest.

Living a life with spiritual intentionality takes courage. If you want proof, just take a look at some of our very human role models who have come to be known to us as spiritual revolutionaries: Nelson Mandela, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mahatma Gandhi, and many, many more including Jesus of Nazareth. Regardless of the times in which they lived, they were required to know themselves and invest themselves irrevocably in the values that marked their lives.

For some, it meant renunciation---giving up an otherwise comfortable life in the village or in the countryside to travel a road of self-sacrifice. For others it meant stepping forward to accept a mantle of leadership whether or not they wished to do so. For still others, it meant living their lives alone, whether in prison or in exile or in a wilderness they would certainly not otherwise have chosen.

These were and are especially remarkable individuals and so it is not surprising we know them by name; but there are many others, perhaps less well-known to us, who are our spiritual foremothers and fathers. They responded to their deepest calling whether it was to heal the world, lead the world, or teach the world. And the very fact that they did it--or continue to do it--serves as a reminder that truly religious people....those who take their spiritual lives seriously....need to live with attentiveness because we will be called—perhaps more than once--to meet our edge.

It was not until I came to the Unitarian Universalist faith that I came to understand that to be a fully religious person required three things of me:

The first is study, whether that means a Holy Book, the words of a Master Teacher, poetry, religious history, or the morning paper.

The second requirement is to develop a spiritual practice—a discipline of some kind that I commit myself to. It might be prayer, meditation, painting, gardening, writing, kayaking, walking.....something that I do alone in order to learn more about myself.

The third requirement to live a fully religious life is to live in community. This does not mean we need to live in an ashram; it simply means that we cannot live a truly full life if we hole up in a cave and meditate. Coming face to face with other human beings and all that surrounds us challenges us to listen and to practice being heard. In a larger context living in community means living in such a way that we will be required to practice hospitality, generosity, civility, thankfulness, forgiveness....all the human values we uphold for communal living.

This morning I’d like to propose that there is a fourth thing that is required of us, particularly as Unitarian Universalists. And that is we need to live in such a way that when we are called upon to do so, we meet our edge. In spite of our fear and unknowing, we move out of our comfort zone with a kind of spiritual curiosity.....stretch our hearts beyond their current preconceptions and biases and.....take a personal “Outward Bound” trip, as it were.

Parker Palmer’s Outward Bound story reminds me of similar experience when I, too, very literally met my edge. I was a young teenager, maybe fourteen or fifteen. As I was the younger of two children....and a girl.....it might not surprise you that I idolized by older brother. Although only two years separated us, his life always seemed more exciting than mine. Because he was older, he was doing things I was not permitted to do and going places I wasn’t permitted to go. And because he was a boy, he was permitted to say things and try

things that I could only dream of. Well, one day he asked if I would like to go hiking with him at Black Rock State Park.

The park was so named because of the enormous black mountain of rock at its center. In addition, it included acres of woods and caves and trails, a variety of camping sites, and a large pond for swimming and fishing. It was a splendid place for children and families to play in the summer.

Well, we hiked and hiked and hiked, and I did my best to keep up. After about an hour of walking, I found myself high on a narrow rock ledge which wound around the great Black Rock. My brother carefully worked his way along the ledge ahead of me until finally he reached the path leading back into the woods. Without his realizing it, I had stopped moving. I was literally paralyzed. I could not move another step. And had I looked down.

“Come on,” he yelled, “you can do it!”

“No, I can’t,” I screamed back at him. “I want to go back. I’m going back.”

“You can’t go back,” he yelled. “I’m not turning around, so you’re not turning around!!

I had reached my edge and I was terrified. I was definitely out of my comfort zone and was at last living the life I had for so long envied.

Before long my brother shouted again, “Don’t look down. Just move your left foot a little bit. That’s right. Now the other one. Don’t look down. Just keep doing that. That’s a girl. Slowly.....”.....and he talked me off that ledge.

I know exactly how Parker Palmer felt as he repelled the face of the mountain. It was an unforgettable experience.

Fortunately, meeting our edge spiritually is usually not quite so death-defying, although our edges can and do provide daunting moments of teachability.

In his personal journal, published under the title “The Inner Voice of Love”, Catholic priest and educator Henry Nouwen calls to himself and to us to make this kind of spiritual journey by entering what he calls *the New Country*. He urges us to leave our Old Country, that place where we reside most of the time in our daily lives, the place where we are very much at home, with all its joys and pains, its happy and sad moments.

He urges us to leave the Old Country and enter *the New Country*, where the answer to our deepest longing dwells; the *New Country* which will require the death of what has become so precious to most of us: our influence, our success, our attachments, and admiration. The *New Country* is where we are called to go, he says, and the only way to go there is naked and vulnerable.

We are asked to trust, to have faith, that all will be well, that we will be safe,.....but still we waver. We cross and re-cross the border. So we live in the *New Country* for a while and then long for what we left behind, so we go back to the Old Country only to discover it has lost its meaning for us. Our deepest truth tells us—repeatedly if we listen—that the only way “home” is into the *New Country*, the center of our yearning, that part of us that is only known to us, if at all, in shades and shadows, doubts and fears.

Most of us who have come to this place of liberal religion, this place of no dogma and no creed, understand that this spiritual journey is singular; it is ours uniquely and must be made alone. We know a good deal about working out there in the world, about challenging legislation, and confronting injustice. We have deep familiarity with that part of ourselves that so competently makes decisions, writes resumes, and speaks publicly. Most of our friends and colleagues, too, know this “Lion” part of us, as Henry Nouwen calls it. That’s the up-and-out part of our being...our Ego-Self; the self we demonstrate to the world.

What our spiritual search is about is uncovering the “Lamb” in ourselves, the vulnerable and divine child who requires affection, support, affirmation, and nurturing....the diving essence of our being that ancient stories tell us was hidden by God in the one place we would not think to look. The more we learn to feel safe as

a divine being, Nouwen says, the freer we are to claim our mission in the world. Our journey is ultimately about learning to let our Lion meet and lie down with our Lamb.

Since earliest childhood we have heard stories and myths that allude to the profundity of the spiritual journey, the journey required of each of us to heal our woundedness, to restore our fragmentation of soul, to bring us wholeness and healing. From those powerful, long-ago stories, we learned that being human is indeed half-light and half-dark. And whether we choose to refer to them as the *light and shadow* parts of ourselves or our *Ego and our Soul* or our *Lion and Lamb*, the truth is this: our central and creative essence is strangely linked to that part of us that dwells in the darkness—and in getting to our essence, we often find ourselves meeting an edge.

One story you may remember is the early English epic of Beowulf, the warrior prince whose requirement was to slay Grendel, the diabolical swamp-creature who preyed on the king and all who lived in his court.

Or maybe more familiar to you is the twelfth century poem of the Grail Hero Perceval. His initiation, you recall, required him to journey toward the Grail Question: “What is the meaning of your wound, the cause of the pain?” and, more importantly, to its answer: “What is the cure?”

These stories and others like them demonstrate that our soul-center, our creative essence, resides in the frightening, dimly-lit, misunderstood places where exploration is necessary and examination is required-----and that it is our spiritual responsibility to put ego aside and make that journey.

We learn from these stories that to be lived to its fullest, our lives require us to enter what the poets refer to as “the depths”, embrace our interior shadows, and wrestle our perceived demons and dragons. Once we have wrestled with our greatest fears, the stories say, we can admit them as part of ourselves and embrace them as part of our humanity.

In preparing this sermon, I asked a number of people if they would share with me a time when they met *their* edge.....a time when they felt compelled to move into that New Country to find out more about who they were and who they could become. One woman, up in years, told me it was when she decided to leave her loveless 27-year marriage. A young male friend told me it was when he decided it was time for him to come out of the closet and define himself as a gay man. Another individual told me she met her edge in the midst of a life-threatening illness.

And my edges? I seem to have been meeting a *series* of edges over the last several years. First, to leave a twenty year marriage....then a job I enjoyed and community of people I loved. Let me be clear; those edges were not met without thoughtfulness and angst. There was no clear direction; there were no obvious road signs. But meeting those edges has brought me to Wilmington and to this church. Most recently I have responded to yet another edge I agonized over----moving to an apartment alone which meant leaving family and Arden, my mother’s birthplace. I still see the way ahead only dimly. But the New Country has something for me. I’m as certain of it as I can be without a roadmap. I continue to trust that I will find it, that I will come to know myself more intimately, and be able to define my destiny with greater clarity and purpose.

In spite of anything and everything we achieve outwardly, life ultimately refuses to grant us immunity from our dark, sacred, soul-struggles, if we are to heal and become more wholly human. Spiritually, life demands of us that we meet our edges.

It is terrifying to depart the Old Country, leaving everything and everyone we know behind, and to open our eyes to the larger world knowing we are on our own for the first time. But it is our soul’s yearning, our inner sacred voice leading us toward our fuller selves.

Recently, I was reading a book that retold the biblical story of Jonah. How the words of Yahway instructed him to “go to Nineveh and cry against it for its wickedness.” The story tells us that Jonah was afraid and refused his calling. He had no interest in being the one to rail against the evil and corruption in Nineveh. Instead of traveling a few hundred miles east to Nineveh, he booked passage on a ship headed to Tarshish a

couple of thousand miles due west. Jonah was being called, we might say, toward a *New Country*. But he was afraid, and rather than head east, he headed west.

We know the rest of the story. A storm overcame the ship, Jonah was thrown overboard, and swallowed by a whale. Translated.....he tried to run away from his calling and was thrust into darkness. In refusing to heed the call of that initial nudge, circumstance had a way of leading him there anyway.....and on the way, he was required to face his fears and decide what he must do to help heal the people of Ninevah.

Story after story, we are told that to live spiritually, we must be willing to push our edges and then be willing to claim both our light and dark sides. The crafting of our souls—this becoming human—requires that we take risks that may present our shadow side to us and ask that we embrace it. Our classroom is everywhere: at work, at school, at church, in our relationships, in our communities.

So what will it mean for us to live fully and completely? Which risks are we willing to take? What edge am I being asked to meet—are you being asked to meet—in order for that full humanness within us to be embraced and befriended? If, truly, our wounds define our destiny, how will we make our pain available for healing?

Becoming whole means, as Jesus said, taking up our cross, befriending our wounds, and letting them reveal to us their unique truth. The soul loves that kind of journey; it grows stronger and richer from the curves and turns of each of its experiences.

In closing, I'd like to share another of Parker Palmer's life experiences which is taken from his book *Let Your Life Speak*. He calls it "Way Will Open" and it reminds us that there are a variety of ways to meet our edge.

"By the time I began my sabbatical at Pendle Hill. . . I had been in Washington, D.C., for five years, growing more fearful every day that I was living a life not my own. I was thirty-five years old and had a Ph.D. and decent references, so finding a new job would have been no great problem, not in that place and time. But I wanted more than a job. I wanted deeper congruence between my inner and outer life.

If I were ever to discover a new direction, I thought, it would be at Pendle Hill, a community rooted in prayer, study, and a vision of human possibility. But when I arrived and started sharing my vocational quandary, people responded with a traditional Quaker counsel that, despite their good intentions, left me even more discouraged. "Have faith," they said, "and *way will open*."

"I have faith," I thought to myself. "What I don't have is time to wait for 'way' to open. I'm approaching middle age at warp speed, and I have yet to find a vocational path that feels right. The only way that's opened so far is the wrong way."

After a few months of deepening frustration, I took my troubles to an older Quaker woman well known for her thoughtfulness and candor.

"Ruth," I said, "people keep telling me that 'way will open.' Well, I sit in the silence, I pray, I listen for my calling, but way is not opening. I've been trying to find my vocation for a long time, and I still don't have the foggiest idea of what I'm meant to do. Way may open for other people, but it's sure not opening for me."

Ruth's reply was a model of Quaker plain-speaking. "I'm a birthright Friend," she said somberly, "and in sixty-plus years of living, way has never opened in front of me." She paused, and I started sinking into despair. Was this wise woman telling me that the Quaker concept of God's guidance was a hoax?

Then she spoke again, this time with a grin. "But a lot of way has closed behind me, and that's had the same guiding effect."

May "Way" be open for all of us as we meet and embrace our Edges.

Amen. Blessed be.