Cantankerous Recalcitrants

*This sermon was delivered by Jane Rzepka, minister, Church of the Larger Fellowship, at the CLF Worship Service at General Assembly*

You never know. This time, here we are in Cleveland, Ohio. Maybe you've been here before-on business years ago, or you took the train through once, or you had to land at Cleveland Hopkins airport instead of Pittsburgh in the middle of a snowstorm. Or maybe you went to college here in Ohio and Cleveland was the closest big city. Of course some of you live here, on the East Side, or the West Side or even farther out, and lots of people used to live here before they went off to Florida, or Michigan, or Albuquerque. Some of us grew up in Cleveland-I did-and we used to take the Rapid Transit to the Terminal Tower, the tallest building anywhere, we thought, except maybe the Empire State Building, which nobody we knew had ever actually seen. At Christmas, when I was a child, the draw was Francis the Talking Mule.

At one of the large department stores downtown here, Francis was a large, fake mule, with a talking guy inside, and Francis wished us all a Merry Christmas and gave us little presents. We thought that was a standard and perfectly normal annual Christmas ritual the world over, never once pausing to ponder the tenuous connection between Jesus' birthday and Francis the Talking Mule. Here in Cleveland, if you got decent grades and you lived anywhere in Northeast Ohio, the "best location in the nation," as we used to say, you would receive 14 free tickets to professional baseball games in the old stadium-14 tickets per child, and I came from a family of five kids-that's 70 tickets per season-and these tickets you could not give away-nobody would take them. We thought that was perfectly normal too, to be awash in baseball tickets-you could paper the walls with all those tickets.

A popular outing here in the Cleveland area was going to see the fire tugs on the Cuyahoga River. We have some very nice family movies of all us kids watching these tug boats, hoping against hope that the Cuyahoga would catch fire again and the fire tugs would spring into action. We thought it was perfectly normal for rivers to catch fire, and even today it seems to me a little foolhardy to sit at any river's edge without a fire tug in sight.

Another thing that seemed perfectly normal when I was a child was to have Unitarian churches sprinkled round. You could go to First Church, where the kids in my family were dedicated, or West Shore, that spin-off church that was such a success. Sometimes we went to Sunday School there, or 82nd Street, where my grandparents were married almost a hundred years ago, or East Shore, a start-up congregation where I grew up as a fellowship kid, and whose chalice we are honored to use this evening. There were Unitarian congregations everywhere, places where we felt a religious openness and eagerness, where, as we used to say, "The winds of the spirit moved from many directions." We thought that perfectly normal.

I also found that if I grew tired of Nancy Drew mysteries, there were old books around our house that had been there for quite a while. One was my great-grandfather's Unitarian hymnbook published in 1880. This hymnbook had traveled to Ohio all the way from the very seat of Unitarianism in our country. It represents one strand of our heritage and our roots and our theological tradition. It is incontrovertible evidence of where some of us have come from as religious people. My great-grandfather's Unitarian hymnbook, Unity Hymns and Chorales, was published, you see, in the city we knew to be the Vatican of Unitarianism: Chicago.
It's a great little hymnbook-one of the authors, Frederick Lucien Hosmer, was my great-grandfather's minister, and Hosmer published the old-fashioned kind of hymnbook where the words and the tunes aren't linked, where each page is literally cut in half like a child's flip book. The hymn we just sang, "Calm Soul of All Things," has been carried forward into our current hymnbook. And the same goes for "No Longer Forward nor Behind," which Unitarians have been singing straight on through as well. In fact our current hymnbook, Singing the Living Tradition, contains eight hymns that Hosmer wrote himself. We still believe in that Midwestern openness, where "The winds of the spirit move from many directions."

Another book up there on the family bookshelf is a Sunday school textbook about Jesus. Florence Buck wrote it, and Rev. Buck and her partner, Marian Murdock, would have been my family's co-ministers for six years in the late 1800's, during my grandmother's adolescence. So growing up a Unitarian in Cleveland kind of makes you understand that women serving as co-ministers has been perfectly normal for a very long time. The winds of the spirit move from many directions.

There's a lot of talk these days about how we UUs should understand our roots, in fact CLF's September issue of Quest contained a sermon by the Rev. Liz Lerner in which she said, "On both the individual level and the denominational level, we may weaken our belief system by attending only to the wings of our aspiration and not to the roots from which we spring."

If you grew up a Unitarian in Cleveland, as in many places, you have access to a specific theological history. Maybe you have a collection of Minot Simons's sermons on your shelf. He came to First Church in 1900, and was a great favorite of my grandmother's-the "ideal man of my young womanhood," she writes in the front of her sermon collection, and "I valued his friendship." She was 19 when he arrived. When Simons's collection of sermons, Vexed Questions, came out in 1913, my great-grandfather bought a copy, and later handed it down to her. My grandmother gave this book of sermons to my parents as a present in 1956, when they were helping to get the new fellowship, East Shore, going.

Now I have it, and when I read parts of it I know that I come by this Midwestern corner of Unitarian Universalism honestly. The Rev. Simons said, "It has been my aspiration in life to be a minister of vital religion. There have been no ministers in my family as far as I know, and so I have had no family traditions to influence me. My immediate family have been Unitarians . . . for two generations, and so I have had none of the historic Christian traditions and doctrines to influence me and to comprise religion to me. I entered the ministry because I felt the religiousness of life."
He went into the ministry well over 100 years ago, and in his experience of living in his own family and looking back a couple of generations, Unitarians are not Christians, they are religious people who, again in his words, "are privileged to believe what is believable." I know that many contemporary Unitarian Universalists feel otherwise, and that other historical figures were otherwise motivated, but Simons entered the ministry all those years ago not because he wanted to serve Jesus or God, but because he simply felt "the religiousness of life." During his Cleveland days, Rev. Simons was big on "truth in our minds and love in our hearts," and he understood that our religion must be made manifest in the world. He preached that we feel most at home in territory where the winds of the spirit move from many directions.

There's some great old stuff, and I do believe that a peek into the primary sources yields both a lot of knowledge about where our religion comes from and a lot of amusement. On the Universalist side in Ohio, for example, a history book, Elmo Robinson's The Universalist Church in Ohio, published in the 1920s, claims that in the old days, there were two kinds of people who weren't affiliated with conventional churches: The first type were "men of evil character," and the second were "thinkers of an advanced type, rebelling at the narrowness of conventional religion," and attracted "by the philosophy of the so-called atheism of the day." The book goes on to tell us that apparently, "a great proportion of these people became pronounced Infidels," that is to say, Universalists. One Methodist minister, upon hearing of a new Universalist group in town, said, "I have been fighting the devil for a great many years, but now he has settled right here in our midst!" These Universalists were folks who said right out loud that parts of the Bible "contradict reason and nature." You go back and read some of the old Universalist sermons and commentaries and you begin to understand that what the Universalist ministers were known for around here was their intellectualism. As one source put it, "Pastors came and went-all good and intellectual men."

I know you've probably heard that it was the Unitarians who were intellectual, and that the Universalists were known for their "hearts." But in Ohio at least, that just wasn't true. In fact, Universalists were proud to preach a "religious intellectualism," and not only that, they were known frankly to be "cold"-as one author put it in the 1920s, "The Universalists did not 'put much of their life in their religion.'" Our Universalists here in Ohio were known, at least in one part of the state, not for their loving character but for their arguing-church members even beat each other up once in a while.

The Unitarians and Universalists felt a great affinity for one another, consolidating here and there, going under, reviving. But throughout it all, as a minister said in a sermon in 1932, on the eve of one such consolidation in Cleveland, "The genius of Universalism and Unitarianism, the element which makes them distinct from other denominations, is their spirit of intellectual pioneering."

The way this intellectual pioneering worked was thought to be this: Religious liberals moved through stages. The first stage was a conventional kind of Christianity, then came an intermediate stage where Christian language-words like God, prayer, or salvation, would be used but with the meaning changed or expanded in an attempt to make those traditional words fit the new religion. Then, as the liberals progressed, they left that effort behind, they stopped trying to reclaim the language, and moved into a simple, theistic Unitarianism. Finally, as these historical Unitarians described the process, the newer Unitarians got to the point where they could accept a naturalistic humanism. That's how they saw the process.

So you can understand why in 1890, when the American Unitarian Association demanded that the "Westerners" (the folks out here in the Midwest) adopt Christian theistic language, language they did not feel was part of their religion, the Midwesterners would not yield to the folks from Boston, and for maintaining their theological integrity they were called, "cantankerous recalcitrants." Because they would not adopt language that they had no experience of as Unitarians, they were called cantankerous recalcitrants! You can see how perplexing it is to hear contemporary Unitarian Universalists say that there are some among us who are "afraid of God language," or how some UUs are "uncomfortable" with the words "prayer" or "grace" and the like, when in parts of the Midwestern tradition, many UUs are just happily living their authentic Unitarian heritage. Over a hundred years ago the Unitarian minister at First Church preached about prayer and he said, "I have frankly and completely given it up. It is a good deal harder to keep it than to give it up, and I believe we must give it up. . . " That's one strand of Midwestern Unitarian Universalism for you.

Let me go back to the bookshelf of my childhood one last time. Up there were some smaller books; these were particularly beat up. My grandmother had two spiritual practices: she kept a diary, and she kept commonplace books. In an essay about commonplace books earlier this year in Harper's Magazine, Nicholson Baker talks about how when he reads and he comes across something he really likes, he puts a little dot in the margin. And then, at some later date, sometimes years later, he locates the dots and copies them out in a spiral-bound notebook. He says that that's about the only handwriting he does anymore, and that whenever he "takes up the studious pen and begins," it makes him a happier person, that his "own bristling brain-urchins of worry melt in the strong solvent of other people's grammar." That's what my grandmother did too-she wrote commonplace books. I picture her sitting there in her parents' home, first writing in her diary: "January 2, 1908-Made chiffon pies before breakfast, washed dishes & swept, prepared a fruit salad. Went to church. Rev. Simons spoke on "Conflict and Discontent" and I got just what I needed. Later, play rehearsal at church. Professor Dukes acted as my escort home."

And then she would take her commonplace book out of the drawer-I can remember that later in her life she kept them in a drawer-this early commonplace book she named, "Favorite Girlhood Poems," and she would copy out a passage from Ralph Waldo Emerson, or Wordsworth, or Harriet Beecher Stowe, or Longfellow, or Lowell.
Or from a minister, maybe. She might write: "Being 'spiritual' is a characteristic that humanism values and seeks to foster." Or "Worship, in the highest sense-namely, paying reverence to valuable qualities-is not dependent upon belief in the existence of God." And then back to the diary: On April 17, 1908, she wrote, "Got up at 7:15 to prepare a rice pudding. Good Friday service at church. Rev. Simons spoke on "The Meaning of the Cross" & it was a perfect tragedy." (I kid you not.) Went downtown Cleveland with Mr. Ranney, left him at the arcade to join the family for lunch."
And back to the commonplace book: "To know one's self as inherently worthful, actually to find fullest expression in the widest human service and consciously to become a co-worker with cosmic processes, is spiritual experience deep and abiding." Or, "Our ideal church-what is it then? Primarily it is this: . . . in the natural emotions of love, awe, and gratitude common to all people, emotions that rise with the contemplation of the great mysteries of nature and being." (The Rev. Celia Parker Wooley, May 16, 1889)

And so, day after day, she makes a chocolate cream cake before breakfast and writes a letter, and ice skates, and bakes cup custard and reads the paper, and makes mince pies and sets the table and bakes a soufflé. And between times, here in Cleveland, she writes in her commonplace book, "Our interpretation of religion has long been beyond Christianity and beyond any historic religion. We cut loose from no history that has contributed to our growth but we seek to make new history that will contribute to the growth of the future. We feel most at home in territory where the winds of the spirit move from many directions." And so she absorbs her religion, and lives it, and passes it from one generation to the next.

Last year, at our General Assembly in Nashville, we sang the songs of Tennessee, and read the poems and told the stories. This year it was Cleveland. Next year and in the years that follow, there will be other tales and different stories. I hope that one year the story will be yours. Because the winds of the spirit do move from many directions.

Jane Rzepka