
The GOAT in the BACK of the PICKUP TRUCK

One of the things that is remarkable about this Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Marion County is how well you've managed the amount of change you've experienced in a short period of time. You built a building only 3 years ago; a project that places tremendous stress on a congregation to the point that many ministers and other leaders don't survive a building project. On top of that your membership has exploded, leaving many of you wondering what happened to that small, cozy 'family' feeling so precious to you. There is sometimes the feeling that there has been too much change too quickly; there is a longing for 'the good old days'. Or at least we want to stop and catch our breath.

Process theology subscribes to the notion that change is a constant: That everything in the universe is in motion, constantly creating something new. We're going to go into this in more depth next week. I ascribe to process theology because I like the idea that I'll always get another chance to exercise my creativity in being a partner in creation. A partner in change. But the early process thinkers – Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, and Henry Nelson Weiman – didn't venture to suggest how to cope with this fact of constant change. At my – and perhaps your – most visceral level, all this creative energy is exhausting and more than a little scary. How are we to cope with the uncertain outcomes of change?

Today I want to talk about fear in the face of the unknown. And I'm going to be using the short story –*Goat in the Pickup* -- by thinker, writer, singer, therapist and Unitarian Universalist minister, Meg Barnhouse – as the basis for our meditation. The story you're about to hear took place on a crystal clear South Carolina morning on a winding back country road. Listen to the words of Rev. Meg Barnhouse.

“Some sights in this world embed themselves in memory and encapsulate a truth about life in a way that words just can't. I saw one of those on day when I came up fast behind a slow flatbed pickup truck on a mountain road. In the back of the truck was a man holding a goat. The goat was standing, stiff-legged, and the man was talking to it. The goat was trying to look over the side of the truck bed, but the scenery whizzing past was no comfort. The man, who had warm-brown skin and the clothes of a farmer, kept talking in its ear. Slowly the goat folded its legs and sat down in the man's lap. Lifting its head into the breeze, eyes closed, it finally relaxed.”

I have a real affinity for goats, which is indulged by my friend, Louise. Louise gave up a lucrative career as a Washington DC attorney to become a goat farmer. She describes this less-than-lateral career move as her 'salvation'. Having been raised on a farm myself, I can understand the impulse to return. It not so much that farm life is simple. It's not. What it is is straightforward, especially compared to my vantage point from thirty years in Washington, DC, where almost nothing is as it seems. (Church life is sometimes like that, too.) So, although farm life is far from simple, Louise's goats are pretty straightforward – they eat, they sleep, they reproduce, and they give up their cashmere coats once a year. Whatever relational difficulties they have, they either keep to themselves or work it out by butting heads until someone has had enough. As far as I can see, they only get anxious when their schedule is disrupted. When something changes. Like being put in the back of a truck. Then they become afraid.

So far I can't see that goats are too different from us. They are creatures of *obligatory gregariousness*, a term that describes “the invisible forces that link one human being to another.” Researchers have discovered the profound, but not surprising fact that our brains and bodies are designed to function in aggregates, not in isolation.

They go on to say, “The attempt to function in denial of our need for others, whether that need is great or small in any given individual, violates our design specifications. The effects on

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health are warning signs, similar to the ‘Check Engine’ light that comes on in today’s cars with their computerised sensors. But social connection is not just a lubricant that, like motor oil, prevents overheating and wear. Social connection is a fundamental part of the human operating and organising system itself.”

Although Unitarian Universalists may top the list of beings subject to this drive to social connection, we aren’t the only creatures subject to it. Christians and Hindus and Pagans and motorcyclists and mathematicians – in fact, all mammals – and even some fish – can only be actualized in community with others like themselves. Presumably this drive includes the community of goats. So, to get back to today’s reading, you can imagine the degree of anxiety a goat might feel at being taken from its pasture and put into a conveyance totally foreign to its experience – a pickup truck -- without even benefit of the company of its own kind. I think it might be akin to our being abducted from our dinner table and put on board a spaceship with nary another human in sight.

Here’s what Meg Barnhouse says. *“I recognized that situation. I have been a goat in the back of a pickup truck heaving itself around mountainous curves. Out of place, out of my element. Deeply confused, with no helpful experience to help me deal with my predicament. Sometimes there is someone whispering in my ear, ‘Just stay calm. Sit down, give up. Everything’s going to be all right.’ In such a situation, the first thing I want to do is keep my feet. I want to stay up, ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice. I want to see over the side even though that only makes things worse. I can’t figure out if I’m on my way to a better place with deeper grass and better company, or whether I’m being transported to the slaughterhouse.”*

My friends, I don’t wish to be indelicate, but I want to point out that the slaughterhouse is the final destination for all of us. We are given death at the same moment as we are given birth. I don’t think the question of destination is really the point of this story. I think what Barnhouse and I are asking us to think about is the way in which we decide to ride in the truck – how are we going to handle the fact of our fear of change. Our fear of the unknown. How are we going to find the courage to relax a bit.

There’s a lot of advice on how to deal with anxiety and fear – how to muster up some courage. The Hebrew and Christian scriptures, the writings of Lao Tse in the Tao Te Ching, and the Hindu Bhagavad Gita admonish us to trust in some higher power. “Even a little effort toward spiritual awareness will protect you from the greatest fear,” explains Sri Krishna. “Fear not”, said an angel to the shepherds. And to paraphrase our James Luther Adams, “I call that **person** free that does not cringe in despair, but casting off fear is lured by the divine persuasion to respond in hope to the light that has shone and that still shines in the darkness.”

What is that light to which JLA refers? I would suggest that it is our liberal religious values -- **hospitality** in an uncertain world, **neighborliness** even across species, **forgiveness** that we aren’t as brave as we might be, **compassion** in the face of our fear, a **generosity of spirit**, and above all, **tender-loving care**. I think that farmer’s lap in this story is a metaphor for the comfort we find in these Universalist values. But I also think our Unitarian reason is also at play. We often don’t know where we’re going, but can understand that making a premature decision to “fight, freeze, or flee” doesn’t serve us well. As Barnhouse suggests and logic dictates, we *“need to let go until such time as action is possible.”*

Good advice on how to resist anxiety and fear is not limited to theologians and their reliance on supernatural beings. The Buddhist Dhammapada suggests “Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think. Joy follows a pure thought like a shadow that never leaves.”

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On the other side of the world Aristotle observed, “We become brave by doing brave acts.” He goes on to say, “by being habituated to despise things that are terrible and to stand our guard against them we become brave, and it is when we have become so that we shall be most able to stand our ground against them.” In other words, we practice being courageous. We learn about terrible things from the moment we are born and we learn how to stand guard against them the practice of *acting* brave even when we don’t really *feel* brave.

William Bennett, in his Book of Virtues, defines courage as “a settled disposition to feel appropriate degrees of fear and confidence in challenging situations.” Of course, what is an ‘appropriate degree of fear’ varies with the particular circumstances. Fear resulting from being plucked out of your normal environment with no warning and no indication of what lies ahead is different from fear of changing the brand of coffee served up at the Fellowship Hour. There’s a whole range of fear situations in between those two extremes. Other people, sometimes simply by being there, help us discern the degree of challenge in a given situation.

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What we’ve seen is the farmer had a lot of resources to draw upon to deal with a fearful creature. While Barnhouse doesn’t tell us the words this farmer used to help the goat find the courage to let go and relax, I like to think it was something like what parents say and do to fractious babies. By simply being a non-anxious presence and murmuring comforting sounds many babies will relax into waiting laps. We need to do more of this for each other. Unitarian Universalists are often packed into truck beds whizzing off to marches, demonstrations, volunteering at food pantries and elementary schools and clinics, and chairing meetings of organizations dedicated to effecting social justice. When we’re not on that particular truck route, we’re being driven to book clubs, discussion groups, concerts, lecture series, and workshops. We Unitarian Universalists are a lot of wonderful things, but ‘relaxed’ is not a term that immediately comes to mind. “Relaxed” in America is a very counter-cultural state of being. And it produces a fairly high state of anxiety. So what can we do to nurture ourselves and each other so we find the energy to appropriately respond to the fear-inducing world we live in?

Barnhouse continues her story. *“The whole time I hear a voice saying, ‘Just sit for a while and relax. Surrender to events. Don’t try to intervene at this time. Detach yourself from outcomes.’ I don’t know whether the voice is from the Spirit of Life or the goat-meat factory. Eventually I figure out that there is nothing to be done at this point. My fear isn’t helping. My feet can’t help. My alertness is working against me. I need to let go until such time as action is possible. I decide to enjoy the nice voice in my ear, to sit down to gather my thoughts, to worry about it all later.”*

As I held the vision of the goat in the back of a pickup truck during a week of a continuing environmental degradation, violence in Africa and the Middle East, rampant economic and social injustice in the Western world, and a bankrupt political system in my own country the words the Serenity Prayer kept coming to mind: “...grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.”

There are a couple of things that the goat in the pickup truck – that **we** -- can’t change. One thing we can’t change is knowing for sure the identity of the mysterious driver of the truck. We can guess that we’re being driven by the media or the government or broken family systems

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or corporate greed or however-you-choose-to-name-the ground of our being. But we really don't know what or who is in the driver's seat.

Our destination is also a mystery. Is this a route that really will end in a green pasture beside still waters? Am I on my way to the breeders with lots of goats to choose from? Or is this the road to the slaughterhouse? Since we don't know the driver's instructions we don't know for sure where we're going.

We could change our situation by jumping out of the truck. But that would leave us possibly injured and certainly alone. Remember our obligatory gregarious nature. We are designed to function in aggregates, not in isolation. We seem to be better able to cope with uncertainty than with loneliness. So, really, given the available options the wisest choice is to relax.

Barnhouse concludes her story by observing, *"I have worked hard to find my place, to find my strength, to surround myself with trusted voices. Every now and then, though, I still find myself in a goat-in-the-pickup-truck situation."*

And so do we all, my friends. So do we all.

How are we going to ride in the pickup truck of our lives? What are some ways we can have a more comfortable journey? One way is to tell stories. Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and one of the twelve most effective preachers in the English language, has this to say when talking about the power of stories: "It is not that the facts don't matter. It is just that they don't matter as much as the stories do, and stories can be true whether they happen or not. You do not have to do archaeology to find out if they are genuine, or spend years in the library combing ancient texts. There is another way home. You just listen to the story. You let it come to life inside of you, and then you decide on the basis of your own tears or laughter whether the story is true. If you are in any doubt, it is always a good idea to watch other people who have listened to the story – just pay attention to how the story affects them over time. Does it make them more or less human? Does it open them up or shut them down? Does it increase their capacity for joy?"

Another way to ride in the pickup truck is to learn as much as you can about the possible routes and what you might encounter along the way. Read the maps. Check out the Chambers of Commerce along the way. Consult different travel guides. Having options helps ease anxiety.

A third way to ride is to become actively engaged in the ride. Poke your head over the sides and assess the situation. Maybe it is a good idea to jump off the farmers lap, especially if you see a herd of like-minded goats in a nearby pasture. You don't know what action to take until you have a look at what's around you.

Finally, meditation or centering prayer or some other form of a spiritual practice will help give us the confidence that we'll know what to do once we get to where we're going. We're going to talk more about that next month.

Barnhouse closes with these words, *"May I be given the wisdom to know when to sit and just let my ears flap in the breeze."* I would like to close by echoing that sentiment. Let's meet the challenge of change by relaxing into the lap of our liberal religion, remembering our liberal religious values of hospitality, neighborliness, forgiveness, compassion, generosity of spirit, and above all, tender-loving care. And may our ears flap in the breeze of the murmuring voices of our free faith. Amen.