

JULY 17, 2016

## Sunday Sermons: “Sweetie Pie” & “On the Road to Fern Street”

*Dick Sederquist*

First Reading: **Sweetie Pie, Part 1.**

*They say the state bird of Minnesota is the mosquito. As a dedicated hiker, I would like to propose the Maine state insect as the biting black fly. I call them by their corrupted Latin name, “blackus horribilis”. And we all know what the Connecticut state insect is. Right? The praying mantis! Look at the cover on your order of worship. Her name is “Sweetie Pie” who brought comfort and new meaning to our lives.*

She’s back again or maybe never left, just escaping our view for the last two months. She’s grown to over 4 inches in length, eating aphids from our roses. I like to tell myself this is the same one that performed for us and the mailman in late summer. That day she was on the back deck railing, soaking up some sun. Hearing my friend the mailman arriving in his truck, I ran out front and asked him if he wanted to see a beautiful sight. For the next three minutes, I dutifully guarded the U. S. Mail while he inspected our prize alien visitor from the insect world. “She just followed me with her triangular head” he said “like she was inspecting me, rather than the other way around.” When a creature that large tracks you, you get the feeling you are dealing with intelligence. It goes further than that. There appears to be some unspoken trust between us, like “I know you are not a threat since you are not screaming and swinging a broom.” She just looks at me, posing for the camera. I wonder, who has adopted whom?

You may wonder why I call her “she”. The female of the praying mantis species grows larger than the male, who seldom makes it through the act of mating. The female is a voracious eater. I have to forgive her for that. He did get his reward. She will lay a frothy egg mass just before she dies in the late fall. The young will be born in the spring. I talk to her. “Hi, Sweetie Pie”, I say. You are beautiful.” My granddaughter says “Grandpa, why do you always call lady things, Sweetie Pie, and boy things, Buddy?” “I don’t know, Sweetie. It just comes out.” My father in law used them as terms of endearment for everybody. I guess I’m approaching the

age where it is an acceptable thing to say. I mean only respect. You can't help but respect this creature.

She's been out on the railing three days in a row. One evening I saw her hanging upside down motionless, partially hidden under a rose stem. It was growing colder and darker. It wasn't until later the next morning, with the rising sun, that she started to move, returning to the railing and the overhanging rose leaves covered with aphids. What dreams did she have all night waiting for the dawn?

The weatherman says we have at least another week left of Indian summer. Then they expect a cold front and rain. My lady friend may be pressing her luck, better get those eggs laid. It's almost mid November. Her abdomen looks full. A few hard frosts will do her in. She will die but leave her legacy. I'd love to have a litter of these creatures around next year.

Before church, I watched her patrol the railing, often sitting upright with her forelegs held in that classic position. I was thinking that I must write a story about her and her prayerful patience. It was Remembrance Sunday at church. We dropped pebbles into a bowl of water, the ripples symbolizing the spirits of departed souls spreading out, washing over our lives, making us whole, the circle of life and death and life renewed.

Monday morning and she's back again. She switched from the railing to the black grill cover, which absorbs a lot of heat from the sun. She's lying there in a submissive prone position, facing east, I think Mecca. Her kind goes back further than any human ancestor. She's praying to her ancient roots. I'm going to miss her when she dies. We all die, but we've passed on our seed. She'll pass on hers. Winter will come. Spring will bring new life and remembrance. Pray for us my friend. Pray for us.

Every morning she appears from underneath our deck and climbs up the side of the house to the deck railing and onto the grill cover. She doesn't appear to be eating anymore. She is preparing for her end, sharing her last days with us. She has probably laid her eggs underneath the deck. I hope so. This has been a wonderful experience for both of us, bringing us closer together. We have shared something eternal. It will be one of my last thoughts, these beautiful fall days and this miniature princess of time sunning herself, under our view and our protection. I believe she must feel some kinship with us. I don't know how to end this story. It's

still continuing. The cold and rain, the wind and the frost will end this tale. She'll just disappear, but not from my mind, not from my thoughts. Next spring, I'll look carefully for her children. They say you can't go home, repeat exactly the same experience over again, but I'll try. Next fall, with the roses overhanging the railing on my deck, I hope to say, "Hi Sweetie Pie, you are so beautiful."

### **Second Reading: Sweetie Pie, Part 2.**

Hi Sweetie Pie, you are so beautiful. It's November 14 and an unusually warm day for this time of year. This is an ongoing story. We'll have to leave one of our deck chairs outside this winter. Our resident praying mantis, who we dubbed "Sweetie Pie", has just laid a frothy egg mass on the back of the chair. If we brought it inside, they would hatch, inundating us with praying mantis fry. That would defeat her main purpose in life, to pass on her existence to her children. Personally, I think her purpose is grander than that. She will die shortly, having succeeded in her mission. This spring, they will hatch and start the cycle anew.

We humans have this idea that our existence means more than just passing down our genes. I'd like to think so, maybe just to document the wonders we have seen and learned during our existence and pass that information along to our children to enrich their lives. With Sweetie Pie, there was no debate. She devoted her entire life this year to eating and staying healthy for the right moment. That occurred today. After living on our back deck and entertaining us since this summer, she climbed up the back of one of our Martha Stewart outdoor patio chairs, found a comfortable position, and laid her eggs, sharing another very private moment with us. It looked like a tough delivery. She looks drained, literally. She has lost a long fluid mass the diameter of a quarter. She hasn't moved since. Now starts the vigil. Will she return to her usual haunt, or is this it? She could last another few weeks in retirement, but the upcoming weather will probably not be kind to her. A cold rain is expected tonight.

It's November 16. After her delivery, she moved from her position next to her eggs to underneath the chair. There she stayed, motionless for the next 36 hours, hanging upside down with her forelegs drawn up in that classic praying position. This morning we checked on her, and she was gone. Maybe a local critter took her, or she just decided to go away to a private place. I hope that is the case. We don't own her, never did, and have already received her prayerful blessing.

As I've said, we'll leave the chair outside this winter, try to protect the egg mass as if it was laid under a limb or in a quiet place away from the wind and elements. We owe it to her since she gave us so much enjoyment. More important, she gave us so much food for thought and our own enrichment. I can't help but believe that she is just as important as us in the scheme of things. Without her, the insect world, microbes, viruses and the like, we would never have climbed the ladder of our evolutionary success. Only through our interaction, by culling and survival, by symbiotic relationships with the normally unseen world have we reached a higher rung. We owe them our existence. God empowered us all to reach this point. I am no more God like than my friend. We are all truly blessed. I wish the world could learn that. *Story by Dick Sederquist, November 2005*

**Reflection: "On the Road to Fern Street and What We Found When We Got There: A Celebration of Unitarian Universalism"**

This is my second opportunity to deliver a sermon in this sanctuary. I had always wondered what it would be like standing up here and looking into the eyes of the congregation while giving a sermon. This is a short essay I sent to our previous settled minister, Jan Nielsen, about seven years ago. It's called "*Window Panes.*"

*"As I sit in the pew of our church sanctuary, I count 5 very large tall windows on either side, each containing 50 rectangular bottom panes and 12 curved irregular top panes filling the arch of each window. That's a 620 pane mosaic view. The load bearing walls between the windows form columns that help to support the curved ceiling over our heads. The windows look out on sky, trees, plantings and the walls and rooflines of adjacent properties. Half of the year, the trees display their finery, sometimes still and often waving to us. Half of the year, we look for the emergence of tiny buds and the promise of new light green foliage. Our minister recognizes that often, even during her excellent and thought provoking sermons, that those same thoughts sometimes cause individuals in the congregation to drift off into their private reveries, their view often directed through the panes of our magnificent windows. I wonder how many of us at a time are looking outward as our thoughts turn inward. I guess only our minister would know since she has the vantage point of looking directly into our faces.*

*On dreary days, the rain sometimes runs in sheets and rivulets over the panes, distorting the outside view. On dreary days of the soul, the film forming between our eyes and the windows blurs our ability to see the emerging buds, losing hope*

*in the renewal of life. I wonder if during these times our minister can see the light from those 620 window panes reflected in our eyes.”*

*I sent the above thoughts to our minister. She returned my message with these kind words. “It was like a meditation to me. Those windows are dear to us. And yes, I do look out into so many eyes and see the light that shines in all these lives.”*

### **On The Road to Fern Street**

Our sixth annual men’s retreat was held at the Wisdom House Retreat and Conference Center in Litchfield at the end of April. I led a program on celebrating our Unitarian Universalism. The exercise consisted of two parts. First, was to review our faith journey and significant milestones in life from childhood up to the present day, with emphasis on those milestones since joining our church on Fern Street. The second part was devoted to recounting how our Unitarian Universalism, our membership in this congregation, has affected and changed our lives. What new opportunities and activities have we experienced as UU’s? What do we highly value about our relationship with Unitarian Universalism at Fern Street?

Most of us come from different faith traditions. As children we did what our parents told us to do. My Congregational Church was conveniently located only two houses away. I attended Sunday school, was in the children’s choir, sang solos as a boy soprano, and went through confirmation. I was a member of the high school youth group for one reason, because it was co-ed.

Never once do I remember anything religious, or even spiritual, spoken in my house. I do remember my father talking about science, space and time all the time. Unfortunately, he also talked and bragged about his life and work accomplishments to the point that I stopped listening. Little did I know that science, space and time would become the basis for much of my spirituality later in life. He planted the seed, but like the 17 year cicadas, it took a long time to emerge. Like my parents, I was just going through the motions, without a single sincere religious thought. When my wife, Linda, and I got married, we continued going through the motions, attending a Congregational Church and sending our kids to Sunday school up through their confirmation. Our family attendance ended when our Congregational Church took an extremely conservative right turn. We fell off the church bus on the liberal left hand side of the road. I had also suffered an emotional breakdown, recognizing I had been depressed my whole life. Organized

religion was not going to save me. For the next twenty years or so, we attended, as my brother called it at the time, “Saint Matreese” Church, in another words, sleeping in on Sunday mornings.

Growing up and as a young adult, I always had a philosophical disagreement with the Christian church. Although, I couldn’t express them as a child, I was unsettled by the story of the crucifixion and resurrection. It made me feel sad to even think about it. How could people be so cruel? Why do we have to talk about it all the time? The resurrection seemed implausible, a made up story. Supernatural beliefs about a God, creator of the universe, sacrificing his only son to die for our sins had no meaning for me. Was I supposed to feel guilty? I only saw Jesus as a prophet and a shining example of love on earth. The stories in the Bible were metaphors, not to be taken literally. Easter and the communion ceremony were not my favorite times. I’d rather go hiking.

Many of us have had similar experiences, becoming disillusioned and rejecting the religion that we had been insincerely practicing for years, basically doing it on auto-pilot. As a hiker, for the next 22 years, my cathedral became the woods and the mountains, the sky and infinite heavens overhead. Every night sky was a source of wonderment. That was before light pollution. It’s hard to see much at night unless you are away from a major city and in the woods. I remember a night backpacking in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The sky and the Milky Way was so enormous and deep that I felt like I could fall into it. How did this all begin? Did everything just pop out of nothing? Was it always here? Everyday hiking was like a Sunday to me. My communion was a shared backpack meal or handful of “gorp” and a slug out of the same water bottle. Every hike was a spiritual event. The ritual part of this experience was the planning, the preparation, the doing and the reminiscing. My mantra became, “one step at a time”, which became my religion and my practice. That’s how I crawled, walked and climbed out of my depression. My two pet sayings are, “Hiking saved my life” and “Happiness is hiking with my son”. I’m also happy hiking with my wife and friends. Just one happy guy, when I’m hiking. It’s hard to think about anything sad when you can feel your heart beating while raising one foot in front of another.

In my March 20 build your own theology sermon, I recounted my first visit to this church on Fern Street. The settled minister, Stephen Kendrick, blew my socks off. I realized I had been a closet UU my entire life. The theme of his sermon was “Enlightenment”. I’ve been enlightened by this place ever since that day 18 years

ago. Like many, I found a church with love and feelings that match mine. I began to see what was “holy” or sacred in more places than the woods and the stars overhead. I call that “enlightenment”.

About 15 years ago, one of my favorite people in the church, Martha Winslow, facilitated an evening program series based on Julia Cameron’s book and workshop on creativity and writing called, “The Artist’s Way”. Some of Cameron’s quotes are in your order of worship. After a winter mountain snowshoe trip with my son, I was at home reflecting on the adventures and the close bond and love we shared. My father and I were not close. He was too busy and all wrapped up in himself. That wasn’t going to happen with my children. Thinking about the message of creativity from “The Artist’s Way”, I was moved to write a poem about my son, my first creative piece of literature I had ever written in my entire life. Feeling a little hesitant, I read it to my wife. She sat there, and said only one word, “Heavy!” I eventually sent in the poem and four other short hiking stories into the Catskill Mountain 3500 Foot Club, stewards of those mountains. They published them all in their quarterly hiking journal.

Thanks to Martha, and the support of my fellow participants in her program, I had become a published author. Writing unleashed my soul, allowing me to access, unlock and express my deepest feelings. So many things in life that I didn’t fully understand came to light when I started writing. I often say, “I paint pictures with words.” Also, I say, “Creating creates creativity.” Once you start, it’s hard to stop. I found I pray and meditate when I write. I was unable to do that before I started writing. Writing became the way I practice my religion, all because I took the road to Fern Street.

At the men’s retreat, our members all agree that since joining our church, we have all experienced new things in our lives, thanks to this welcoming, loving and challenging environment. We’ve joined committees, served on the Policy Board, volunteered for many projects and programs, joined the choir, learned to play the church organ, served on stewardship campaigns, conducted lay services, became advocates for social change, became whole rather than a bunch of parts. Think of the benefits that we’ve gained, cheaper than a shrink or a psychologist, and deductible on our income tax. What a value! We celebrate this place on Fern Street.

We also talked about what we love about this place and what we highly value about being a UU. Answers included promoting inclusion for all; a place to shape our values; providing emotional, philosophical, intellectual and spiritual perspectives and enrichment; a community of friends; helping people and opportunities to work with others toward social action and justice; a common faith community for the whole family; help in dealing with depression, death and dying; providing challenges and direction for life change; a place to develop and express our spirituality. I would add to that: increased self-confidence, a feeling of belonging; a better understanding of my faith; and lastly, filling my mind with profound mysteries and unanswered questions.

We UU's see the "Holy", the sacred everywhere, in our mates, our children, grandchildren, friends, and nature around us. Love connects us to this world and all who inhabit it. My feelings and love moved me to write "Sweetie Pie", and much more. Each of us have made a connection with Fern Street, a place where on Sundays we find good feelings and faith inside of what our interim minister describes as a "hymn sandwich".

As a hiker, the forests, mountains, the skies and the natural world excite and humble me. Many people say that experiencing nature was their first really spiritual experience. Out of the natural world came our visitor, our little princess of time, our praying mantis, "Sweetie Pie", and the feelings and words she taught me, words that connect me with all of you, moving me to say, "You-are-so-beautiful." We are now looking for a new settled minister. I think we would all agree that we are looking for someone who will fill our Unitarian Universalist "hymn sandwich" with many more good feelings every Sunday morning. Amen.