

**The Sunny Hill
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Rilke is an intensely spiritual man, but not one who devotes his life to guiding others; rather, he simply mines the depths of his own life, a process which will inevitably find jewels of truth applicable to others. We don't know what triggers his need to express the existential moment written in the opening poem today. All we know is how much it speaks to us about living from the heart and being open to whatever it is that calls us. Let's hear it again.

*My eyes already touch the sunny hill,
going far ahead of the road I have begun.
So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;
it has its inner light, even from a distance —*

*and changes us, even if we do not reach it,
into something else, which hardly sensing it, we already are;
a gesture waves us on, answering our own wave . . .
but all that we feel is the wind in our faces.¹*

I offer you just one interpretation of this poem.

Each of us senses some “sunny hill,” a deep hope or longing that we perceive inside us or in the world or both; we may have only the faintest image of what it might be. We cannot know what it is for sure until we get much closer, but still it draws us on. Simply aiming towards it; simply desiring to move towards it, changes us; even beginning the journey towards it changes us. Even if we do not reach that sunny hill, that longed for goal, the *aiming*, the *movement* itself feeds our transformation. The inner light from that distant hill acts upon us as sunlight upon a seedling.

Some part of us that already exists hidden within, perhaps some potential that we have or some barely conscious dream, starts to form and gather power. In our depths, we yearn for that light; our yearning flows out of us in waves of energy, and that for which we long subtly responds to our energy, orienting our desire. This image brings to mind something like spiritual sonar, in which the objects of our dream send out a ping, helping us to know what and where they are.

This journey of the heart and soul, even if for some it includes concrete change and motion, may not be outward at all; it may simply be a passage we take within us. No matter what we see far ahead of us, though, what we encounter most directly is right up against us, resisting us like a headwind. Despite our orientation forward, this wind, these forces affect our path, whether they come

¹ “A Walk,” in *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Robert Bly. Harper & Row. 1981: New York.

from within or whether they are obstacles put in our way. Remember it's a *hill*; it will take will and effort to get there. Rilke is describing the growth of a heart towards its deepest meaning and the journey of a life towards its purpose.

I find another inspiring guide in Parker Palmer, a Quaker who writes on the process of becoming. His approach is always to listen to what's inside, so that someone who, for instance, wants to *become* a teacher or stretch his skills, looks first into his most honest motivations to teach, which will come from both his inner life and the world's need. One of the first guides to vocation that I read in seminary is one of Parker's most powerful books, *Let Your Life Speak*: in it he paraphrases Frederick Buechner: "Vocation is the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need."

Another counsel that Parker offers is that each individual must guide her life from the perspective of her highest purpose and from what her *life* is calling her to do. *Life* may ask us to do something we've not thought of ourselves, even something we might not want to do. Or, to put it more clearly, something we won't realize we want until we do it. That sounds scary, doesn't it? That life may ask us to do what we don't want to.

For a long time in my life, I resist truly opening myself to any new vocation because, based on a childhood fantasy of working with Albert Schweitzer in Africa, I fear that as an adult I'll be called to do just that – to be a medical missionary! No matter how rewarding such work might be, my mind always swarms with images of bugs, unbearable heat, dripping humidity, inedible food... but what I've found is that there are a lot of steps between first asking life what it truly wants of you, and then somewhere down the road doing just that. And finding deep *gladness* replaces fear with much joy.

If a clairvoyant had told me in 1996 that I was going to preach in Olinda 21 years later, I'd have asked, "Where or what is Olinda?" and then dismissed her as a kook. I have a busy, private psychiatric practice in downtown Toronto; there are no dots to connect from there to here. But, in fact, it's that year when my life starts to tell me it wants something *more*, something *else*, something *better* – it's the first glimpse of a distant sunny hill. Having no idea what that something better could be, I consider at various times:

- finding an office partner,
- moving to a new home,
- never falling in love again,
- redecorating my current home,
- relocating to a different city,
- never ever falling in love again,
- getting a dog,
- taking up ballroom dancing,
- never ever ever falling in love again,
- or moving to the country to become a carpenter.

Only gradually does my focus narrow in on changing my work. Having decided that this is in fact a crucial change to make, I consider taking a short sabbatical. Only once I come to that point, do I realize I have to leave psychiatry altogether; that decision itself, which I never regret, takes a carefully planned year to complete. Leaving my work serves only to clear the brush out so I can get a better view of that distant hill. My point is that transformation comes in slices, whether thick or thin, gradual or fast; but if it's a necessary transformation, it pulls us along.

Near the closing of my practice, one of my clients says to me, "You're going to become a minister." And I say, "Never! That's like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire *with less pay!*" In any case, I don't belong to a church or have much interest in organized religion. So I become a Unitarian Universalist shortly after, and two years later, I'm talking to my minister about whether I might be receiving a very roundabout call to ministry, and *she* says, "I've been thinking that about you since I first met you." Just smear butter and jam on me because I'm toast. But the rest of that story takes a whole 'nuther sermon.

Nothing I'm saying today applies any more to me as a minister than it does to you individually on your various paths. Is there something blurry on the horizon trying to catch your attention? Is there dissatisfaction in your life that it's time to resolve? Is there a dream you've dismissed that is patiently waiting for you to reclaim it? Later today, consider taking just one moment to survey your inner horizon to see if any rays of sun are shining far ahead.

Similarly, what I'm saying applies to you collectively as the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda. As your church begins transiting once more the crucial period of search, it will be essential to look forward towards what is your "sunny hill." What do you envision this church becoming? How long a list of possibilities do you have? What might you have stopped hoping for long ago?

The other vital question facing you is what the world needs Olinda to become. What gesture is waving you on? What ministry to the world around you is one that only you can provide?

Right now, North American Unitarian Universalism is facing a crisis in the Chinese sense of the word: a dangerous opportunity. The President of the Unitarian Universalist Association in the United States, Peter Morales, has resigned, as have a number of high level leaders. This is in response to assertions made by some dedicated and long-serving UUs of colour that the UUA, institutionally, is still racist in its decision-making around leadership. I say still because the UUA, congregations and UUs ourselves have before been challenged to look deeply at our assumptions and responses in our inter-racial relationships. Last Sunday and this, all American UU congregations were encouraged by UU leaders of colour to look at and recommence education around racial justice.

Several Canadian UU congregations are also doing so, especially in light of the work we and the Canadian Unitarian Council are doing in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Committee's urging Canadians to be honest about our country's and our individual histories of racial injustice. Some of you know more about this than I do. This is work that your congregation, with the leadership of your Interim Minister, may want to do, but that is up to you. My purpose in raising this is not to repeat facts that can be found elsewhere.

Race work is messy. And I mean *emotionally* messy. We cannot progress towards racial justice without having to deal with and clean up messy feelings: anger, resentment, vengeance, guilt, shame, as well as fulfillment and joy. In 2015, a couple of my seminary colleagues take part in a panel on this topic at the American General Assembly of UUs. My friend Frank tells me that my other friend Amanda makes this point during her participation. A few minutes later, Amanda asks one of the black panelists for her perspective on what whites need to learn first in order to dive into this work. The black woman, who has already said that she is at the end of a long string of workshops like this and is exhausted and frustrated, responds with something like, "Here we are *again*; white people asking black people what *white people* should do about their racism? This is *your* work to do; figure it out." Amanda pauses for a moment and then says, "As I said, this work can be messy for any of us, for all of us."

Right now, here, I bet there are messy feelings raised among you; I certainly have them. A few weeks ago I'm at a meet-up of gay men in a city near where I live and happen to meet a gay policeman just about to retire after 40 years of service. He raises what took place during the Pride marches in Toronto last July when dozens of members of Black Lives Matter Toronto sat down during the middle of the parade to block it, making the demand that in future Pride events no uniformed police should be present. The relations between blacks in Toronto and the police have become too heated for black participants at Pride to feel safe with uniformed police around. I have a conversation with this policeman for a while, tense because he is outraged and I am torn.

My messy feelings are torn because, as a Unitarian Universalist and a minister, my purpose includes being an ally in the work towards racial justice. From that ally position, I support racial minorities insisting upon what accommodations must be made by the majority to begin to establish security for minorities and heal the wounds between these sectors of society. Who am I as a white person to say what is best for *them* in their fight for justice? And what's more, who am I as a white person to compare any kind of suffering or accommodation I must make to the hundreds of years of suffering and subjugation that have been loaded upon minorities?

On the other side, I long for Black Lives Matter Toronto to see Pride and the parade itself as a powerful lesson on how to establish and grow trusting

relationships between minorities and the police. Just months after I move to Toronto in 1980, the bath raids take place and 300 gay men are roughly rounded up and charged. Jobs are lost; suicides committed. There's a riot on Yonge Street the next evening. I also remember cops walking into gay bars bringing an anxious shift in the atmosphere. Then I remember uniformed police beginning to provide security at the Parade and how, over the years, a sense of respect, enjoyment and even playfulness grows between both sides. Then gay cops, fire fighters and paramedics begin to march in the parade in uniform. I long for Black Lives Matter to see this as a template, or at least a part of how to bridge the gaps. But... I'm white... I've had gay *white* experiences with the police... what do I know?

I'll end with one more point. When I first hear about the crisis at the UUA, I read that the problem is "white supremacy" within our community at large. I balk at that phrase. White supremacists live in remote refuges, shave their heads, have swastika tattoos and carry machine guns to the grocery store.

But then I remember how it's challenging to hear about institutionalized racism and to come to see how white people are subliminally given white privilege. I'm learning to identify my privilege, and to call myself out on it. So I read up on white supremacy and discover that it is something like institutionalized white privilege. And the biggest white privilege of all is to be unaware of it; we are white fish swimming in the ocean of white privilege, not recognizing that it's everywhere; that we breathe it.

I imagine some of you are furious at this moment, and I understand that. Fury is part of the messiness. My charge to you, so to speak, is to make yourself listen despite this fury; to hear other voices through this rage; to consider the experiences of those different from you in the presence of this resentment.

The mess is the danger in this crisis. The sunny hill of justice, equity and compassion in all our relations is the opportunity.

May we all do our parts in making this so.

Blurb: Life calls us to meet its challenges, and further, to attend carefully to the signs we receive that guide us toward our highest purpose and greatest task. This applies to us as individuals and to our congregations. Sometimes the task is obvious; sometimes difficult to discern, but the way to our deepest fulfillment is to work towards our highest goal.