

## Developing a Sense of Place and Community

Talk at UUCWI, Sunday August 5, 2007

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Our esteemed Worship Chair has asked three of us to talk, in this series of summer worship services on our land, about a sense of place and developing a sense of belonging to it. Yes, we have met here in the summer for three or four years and done, as you can see, a fair amount of clearing and tidying. But somehow, now that we have made major financial commitments and have mortgages, as well as plans approved by the County, the place is more our own, and our commitment more compelling. This move to our own land and our own building is a crucial event in our history. I'll talk today about general principles and concepts of how one develops a sense of being part of the land and the place, belonging to it, and it to us. In a word, building community.

There is a mystic harmony, almost symbiosis, between people and their land. It is, I think, a very important and spiritual concept and a main ingredient of the seventh Unitarian principle: living in harmony with Nature. First two quotations, a short one and a longer one, the first pithy but profound, the second which pretty well sums up the burden of my comments.

"If you don't know the place you are in, you don't know who you are"  
Wendell Berry. I interpret this as saying that the place you live hugely influences you, so the more you know about it, the better you are likely to understand yourself.

"Place is far more than a matter of geographical landscape. It is an emotional complex of associations...; it is the human communities that inhabit landscapes—their attitudes and values, their particular ways of arranging and expressing themselves and relating both to each other and ‘the outside,’ [culture] . Place, too has something to do with history itself...with ancestry, and the dynamics created by the confluence of the personal and the collective; with spirituality, in all its formal and informal guises; and always, with inevitable change, both inner and outer.' (Attribution unknown.)

### **A Sense of Place has always been vital**

We can all quickly recall many distinguished American writers who have used their sense of place to help define their writings, their enduring greatness, all of their style and inspiration, because they **feel** the place in which they live and write about, and their knowledge and passion are evident – think of Thoreau, Burroughs, Frost, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Mary Oliver. We must learn to be a part (two words) of Nature, not apart (one word) from it.

You need at least two components working together to achieve a sense of place and build up various kinds of capital in it: a feeling of community, and compassion for all the inhabitants and components of the place. Making friends and linkages in a comfortable setting is the key to achieving this sense of place. Social capital has to be built, the principal one of the four kinds of capital of which I’ve spoken before and that help define a place – Intellectual Capital (schools, churches, learning, and of which we are certainly a part); Industrial Capital (all the infrastructure, buildings, roads,

structures factories); Natural Capital, which supplies all basic needs of life - air, water, biological diversity etc and which alas is too often discounted or forgotten in economic calculations) and Social Capital, the myriad interactions of people amongst each other and their living environment that give a place its qualities and its permanence and that accumulate to give life its richness.

### **Spiritual capital**

Being a church suggests that we have a fifth kind of capital: spiritual capital as well; here we all explore, individually and collectively, what makes up the deepest parts of our lives as we struggle through to our individual answers as to purpose in life, and the ultimate meaning of our existence and our own death. And, if you like to think that divinity or God, or whatever, resides within people, making friends in a spiritual setting is a very sacred thing to do. The spirit of compassion and working communally must undergird, pervade and support everything we are engaged in. And, as I'll note later, a local sense of place helps us understand and cope with the larger world and establish a wider sense of belonging to and feeling for the worldwide community.

When we move to a new place and start to make it our own, we inevitably think of both the past and the future. Who have been here before us? Where have we ourselves been? How over the years will we stamp and leave our presence and legacy? What, from both our religious and secular backgrounds will we bring to this place and building? What will **WE** add? Even in UUCWI's fairly brief presence on Whidbey, are there plenty memories and influences we bring from our earliest times: meeting first in people's houses, the Dodge building in Clinton, Bayview Hall, the Grange and Trinity

Lutheran and, of course the links and memories of friends and members. There is significant history already, and we build our future on it here together. Traditions, customs and habits get established, often without our realizing them. All places, all institutions, have a history, just as we have in our 14-year history as a spiritual church community, and it lives and grows along with us.

“Spiritual” is a word and concept many of us find hard to define or comprehend – I struggle with it anyway, though I believe it is intimately linked with all life and the awe life inspires. But I think one aspect is the mysterious, often tiny, nuances of a sense of place that influence us as individuals. Without us fully realizing it, if at all, we interact here in a myriad of ways, and build and refresh our spirits thereby. There is a respect for life being exchanged between people and land, even objects, which we often imbue with life and use as hooks to events and emotions and people. The work we did on the basement of Bayview and the old Coke bottles we unearthed from the cellar, and the reconstruction of the South entryway there; similar clearing and restorative projects at the Grange; the occasional change in orientation and fittings of the meeting room at Trinity; the work many have already done on this piece of land as brush is cleared – all are still there, and all have become part of our heritage. It has become part of our sense of this place

A book just published by an MIT sociologist, Sherry Turkle entitled *Evocative Objects* delves into the power of things to move us, and how objects and places have the power to influence us. We invest time and emotion into them; things become more than necessities or indulgences and

we almost literally become one with them. It's a fascinating concept, and one that will inevitably be evoked here on our land as time goes along. I bet many of us have often felt this sensation of being part of something else, something outside us, and it of us. Men do you confess this about your car or your golf clubs? Ladies, perhaps about some of your clothes or furnishings? We and our possessions evolve a mysterious union. Over the coming months we shall surely feel such identification with our new and changing physical surroundings seeping into our beings as we evolve in our new place.

### **How does one form a sense of place?**

Perhaps it's helpful to think how children – our children, ourselves when we were young and small – grow a sense of place and belonging. It's an important part of being human. (As an aside, I'm inclined to think that many of the grievous aspects of dysfunctional families and communities are because of the lack of ever developing such a sense of place – or, if such a sense is developed, it's one of sadness and hopelessness.) But how do children develop this sense of belonging and being supported. It's a question similar to how children learn their native language. Well, I haven't much of an answer, I concede: it just happens, it can be controlled and directed only barely, but after a while it's indisputably there, and part of you. You just evolve it through myriad interactions with things and events and people. Simply **being** develops your sense of place.

Think back to your own home town or territory; what images, people, memories are evoked? How might they have influenced you over the years? How might you have influenced them? What about those strange things – yours and others you found behind radiators on that had slithered behind cushions on the big armchair? What about names of people and places that

are memorialized in street or area names – Doc Savage Drive; Ebey’s Landing – we all can think of scores of them, and they conjure up memories small and great. I like to muse about the tales and legends that will surely grow as we populate our spaces, as people interact, and the stories that will grow and achieve apocryphal status. I’ll note that a little exaggeration and poetic license are quite forgivable here. All these contribute to our sense of place. For instance, and to offer a personal example: Just a few weeks ago I somehow, when preparing to be lay leader one Sunday set the offering basket on fire. Now how could that possibly happen? Over the years the anecdote will probably grow to that deranged pyromaniac Malcolm trying, with sinister intent, to burn the whole place down. Luckily Mavis and Baird came to the rescue with cups of water – though it may eventually evolve to Kit having doused the blaze with her ecclesiastical stole and the communion wine!

### **Effort is required!**

Taking a U-turn for a moment: If you are uncomfortable in a space, or never seem to settle, why is that? I’d guess it’s mostly the people, more specifically you yourself who bring about any unease. You have to make an effort to become part of a communal unit, be it a church, a village or a social club. You can’t rely on people to come to you, so you have to reach out to them – join a committee, volunteer for a job, say “Yes” should you be asked. And, on the other side of that coin, invite a newcomer to undertake a task; everyone will benefit from such interactions. Goodness knows there are and will be plenty of jobs needing done right here over the next couple of years. All joining in as best we are able will build a community more quickly and solidly than anything else. Give and take in a social setting are very

important. If you are in a space that makes you feel comfortable, productive and energized, the chances are very strong that you have been contributing all the way. Observers seldom get much benefit from sitting on the sidelines. Your involvement helps it become **your** space where you are comfortable, and feel you matter, and you contribute. Note again that you have to reach out and make an effort. Just letting things drift towards you doesn't work too well; reaching out will help you get the results and integration you'd like to have, and the sense of place and the pride and commitment to it will increase.

### **History surrounds us, and we create our own**

Think of the past of this place – the people who have labored, perhaps lived here over the millennia. It is ours now. It is ours to create. Perhaps some of us can view it as a special trust from generations past. It certainly is a heritage for us to pass on to future congregants. It is an exciting and inspiring, and in some ways daunting privilege.

All of us here have come from other places, other communities. Doubtless some of the things we carry in our minds from these earlier days will be transplanted here. Some traditions we grew up with, perhaps in other churches, will be carried here, and enhanced by the circumstances and our fellow congregants. We are creating our own story and history, but we must not forget the backgrounds and upbringing from which we came. We will weave and incorporate them into our ongoing saga.

We influence the place and it influences us. Think for instance of geography and religion. I'm inclined to think there's a close link. Israelites lived in harsh capricious changeable conditions; their God had all these attributes. Middle East weather was hard sharp-edged and unyielding – as are most Muslim concepts. Polynesian weather is calm and soothing; so are the gods of the South Pacific. India is a fascinating mish-mash of conditions; their pantheon of animistic and anthropomorphic gods parallels them. Maybe we will somehow create our very own concepts of the divine and eternal? I'd guess it will have a strong liberal and humanistic bent!

We are pioneers of a sort. I expect new things in the next few years as the building goes up, and we make the whole place our own. We will be almost certainly be exploring and incorporating new forms of worship, many new methods of inculcating feelings of spirituality and service in our collective church life. Consider all the people that will inhabit and expand this place in years to come. What we do in the next few years, as we build our church will surely influence and affect them, and affect how the church community grows.

I should note here again that as we develop a sense of place for our own property right here, we should also be thinking of developing a larger sense of place, that of an inclusiveness of the wider world and broader swatches of place and humanity. We can fruitfully extend it in a truly UU way to embracing a wider vision that includes ALL nature, ALL peoples, often through our Social Action programs. That again is a deeply spiritual reach that we should be aware of trying to encompass.

I quoted Wendell Berry, and his belief that if you don't know the place you are, you don't know **who** you are. I don't believe he is talking about the kind of location that can be determined by looking at a map or a road sign. He was speaking about the knowledge of place that comes from working in it in all weathers, making it into a place of celebration by the investment of labor and cooperation. (And of course I must add - many of you will think I've lost my mind if I don't mention it at least once this morning – how glad I am that we have such a large component of our money and effort going into sustainable pursuits and environmentally sound living. What lasting – permanent – joy in building a Green church that will benefit the coming generations!)

### **We have everything in place for great things to happen**

I am not sure if we have a church historian. We should have. I hope he or she will be asking a lot of questions about the nearly six years since we acquired the property and will be diligent in recording the progress of the ensuing years. Belonging to a place, or it to us, is not a speedy process; traditions are built slowly, alliances with people and the land forged only over time. They should be recorded in words and images.

Our sense of history reminds us that no place is a place until things have happened in it and are remembered in history, in ballads, yarns, legends, monuments and so forth. Stop and really notice detail. This most likely will bring a sense of awe, the start of all spirituality. This will be the first time we have had our very own land and our very own meeting house to be part of, with all its wonder and opportunity. And technical opportunities will await us as well. I should think that in 20 years we will be linked in virtual

reality with other congregations in other parts of the world, sharing vivid experiences with them, each enhancing the others' lives. Yes we must always dream a bit and be expecting magical things to happen – or, more directly, **making** them happen for our and others' enrichment.

We must also realize how fortunate we are to be here. Think of all the many displaced persons -- millions really and, alas, growing in number every day that have no home, no place to put down roots. No expectations of permanency or anything upon which to build. Creating that sense of space must be tough for them. I have a strong notion that many terrorists – think particularly of those responsible for the recent London and Glasgow subway bombs – have rootlessness as a prime cause for their behavior. I've seen no sociological studies, but I'd bet that those young men had no sense of place to help stabilize them.

But we with our present circumstances and, I would say, needs, do have a place that we can slowly and gradually, each in his or her own way, make part of our individual and collective lives. We can be, we want to be rooted; it's generally held to be essential to one's mental health and stability. We can have the excitement and newness of a new place and fresh adventures while we build our own space, moreover pretty well exactly how we want to – one of the special privileges and responsibilities of UUs: we have no synods or hierarchies directing us. What we get is what we ourselves make. It will be **our** creation, **our** place of worship however we define that, and **our** sanctuary. I'm sure a lot of our satisfactions will come from working together – the best way to build friendship and trust. I remember long ago when involved with young people to being told to “rap” with them. That felt awkward and didn't work. But if we worked together on a project – painting

a veranda or clearing away weeds – all went well; conversations were natural and progressive, friendships were built.

And now as I finish this little talk, let me ask you to sit quietly, dream a little and imagine what we might be doing together, say ten years hence – our children's programs, our singings together, our social-action programs, our staff, our new leaders – anything you like. I'm sure it will be a positive moment of reflection for us all. Thinking progressive thoughts is a good start to making progressive things happen.

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