

“Back On Two Wheels with Grit and Gospel”

*“In the midst of a world marked by tragedy and beauty
 There must be those who bear witness against destruction
 And for tenderness.
 Have compassion for everyone you meet,
 Even if they don’t want it.
 What seems like conceit, bad manners or cynicism
 Is always a sign things no ears have hear, no eyes have seen.
 You do not know what wars are going on down
 Where the spirit meets the bone.
 Forget your perfect offering.
 There is a crack in everything.
 That is how the light gets in.”*

Mindful of our opening words from John Corrado,
 Who tells us that we Unitarian Universalists have Good News,
 And that good news had better be more than telling ourselves,
 Our children, and others what we are sure we don’t believe
 About this or that religious idea,
 A practice that often says more about us than the belief itself...

And mindful that long before the word ‘gospel’
 Was hi-jacked by other churches and religions I am tired
 Of apologizing for who have used it to decide who’s in and who’s out,
 The word actually meant ‘good news,’ as in the last shall by first,

And the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, and a little child shall lead them...

And mindful of the idea that the world is not something we're supposed to look at,

As in sight-see or observe from the comfort of distance,

But rather something we're supposed to live in, as in get up close to,

Get proximate to, in all of its magnificence and mess,

This morning I invite you, in your mind's imagination,

To get up out of these Puritan-era penalty boxes,

So conducive to connect us to the past, but not so great to help connect us

To our bodies,

And leave behind the lovely, but closed-in, sequestered, tree-canopy

Of our New England confines,

And set aside our anxious heart, fretful and feverish from the campaign

Trail that we maybe can't keep our eyes averted from the way we do with road-side accidents,

And let us, instead, be led by our collective Ten Speed Hearts,

As Jen described,

Propelling us and warming us

As I take us along for a ride,

And not just any ride,

But a 7 day bicycle race in the French mountains

I competed just a few weeks ago for the second time in two years,

You, us, our UU faith, my ministry closer in my thoughts

Than you might expect,
 But that you should expect,
 Because while vacations from work are needed,
 Who ever said that being religious in the world
 Starts and ends on Sundays?
 Or is confined to church buildings?
 I mean, Heather, Otto, and I may only work one hour a week,
 But that hour has a way of filling up so much of our time.
 Ministers, Amen?

Two days before I leave
 For the long flight to Nice, France,
 Via Logan, via connections through Germany,
 Via the ease of immigration that comes, let's be honest,
 With an American passport,
 But would be radically different if instead of *American*
 It read *Syrian* or *Afghani* or *Somali*,
 I catch Sally Demler, longtime member, on the front stoop of the church.

“*Why??*” she asks with incredulity, when I tell her
 The course will have us climb 21,000 meters or 63,000ft and 800km
 Or 497 miles in seven days.

And real quick, without thinking, the words come out:

“*Because I'm alive!*”

As in, use it before you lose it; as in, pedal before it perishes;
 As in, if one of our affirmations of faith is that religion ought
 To be primarily concerned with this life, here and now,

And not some other life,
Then shouldn't we get up off on the couch
And be in the world and not just look at the world?
"Yeah, all right," Sally says,
Because she has lived long enough and loved long enough,
And lost enough,
Like the rest of us,
To understand what I mean.

On the plane ride over, I, of course, sit next to the guy
who has seemingly been waiting all week for someone to talk to.
You ever sit next to someone like that?
Are you someone like that? It's ok, you're loved.
And after he tells me how he lives in the North End,
And how great it is, and how many restaurants there are,
And how he's so glad he doesn't live in the suburbs,
He then asks me the question every member of the clergy
Dreads from strangers, if we're honest,
Which is: *So what work do you do?*

Which is why we often lie, or at least I do,
because the moment someone learns what I do
Out comes the awkward silence and them trying to remember if they
Cursed or not in the minutes before,
And then confessions about why they don't go to church,
Or about how they're spiritual but not religious,
And how they find God in the sunsets and mountain ranges

instead of at church,
as if we didn't find God in those places, too;
as if being religious might not actually be all about you and your
preferences;
as if it had never occurred to them that the real growth opportunity
comes from connecting to the sacred in a community
of people who actually call you on your stuff.

Ok, so maybe I'm a tad touchy, a touch defensive.

Which is one reason why I lie. Last year I told the person on the plane
That I was in middle management at Staples.

But Staples is in a rough patch, which would lead to discussions
about lay-offs and the economy, which would lead to politics,
Which would lead to the presidential election campaign,
And I'm just not going to go there.

So this year I answered blandly: *Human Resources*.

And the beauty of such a response is that it is actually true,
Because if our good news is that our job isn't to get people into
Heaven but heaven into people,
And if our good news is that all people, every one, can hope
For salvation in this world, salvation meaning healing, whole, wholeness,
Which we all deserve, every one of us, no matter how broken apart...
Then isn't it my job to help you and me and all of us connect again
To our sources, our mind, heart, body, spirit...?

To re-source us so that we stand together and reach out together and ride together in this world we are tasked with bending toward justice, as MLK said,

Which he borrowed without attribution from Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker?

I mean, isn't our shared ministry a ministry of re-sourcing our humanity, Reminding us who we are, who are meant to be, who we are called to be? Aren't we all in *human resources*?

“Cool,” Mr. Chatty says, no-much-the-wiser,

He sensing accurately that all this work of human resourcing has left Me an introvert for the long plane ride.

Race starts in Nice, or “NICE” as the airline steward said

When I handed her my ticket.

And it is nice – astonishingly so, as the taxi

Takes me along the promenade, Mediterranean coast on the left,

Palm trees and café's and beautiful people in too-big-for-my-face sunglasses

On the right....

Until, of course, I see the trio of French military walking along

The promenade, next to the bikinied teenagers, in their full camouflage

And automatic rifles slung against their waist...

And then the cones and rope then line out on the promenade for 2km,

That's 1.2 miles,

Where the man drove that truck in July on Bastille weekend,

Killing and wounding all those people.

Flowers and stuffed animals and signs everywhere,

Including a giant sign emblazoned with a slur against ISIS.
 In our church, with our faith, we say that suffering is a part of life,
 And not punishment for a way of living, and that is good news
 Against those who might tell you that everything happens for a reason,
 Except as I follow the rope along that forever, forever strip of horror
 In the middle of so much beauty,
 I want to ask whomever, whatever: *but this much suffering?*
This suffering is part of life, too?
How? Why? Explain yourself!!!

Against this backdrop the next morning kicks off Stage 1,
 136km over three mountains,
 500 of us starting, including the eventual winner,
 A Dutch pro who had just come back from competing in Rio,
 And Claude, the lean, muscled, tan 73-year-old,
 And the horde of MAMIL's (remember the acronym:
 Middle-Age-Men-In-Lycra),
 And the 37 women, including Nicole, who along
 With her husband and parents brought her 7-month-old,
 Who she is nursing (nursing!) every night after 7 hours on the bike,
 And who beat me across the line 6 out of the 7 stages
 (and I - and I say this with all humility - I'm no slouch!).

But that's not the only news. The other news is that
 As we climb higher and higher the temperature doesn't get
 Any lower or lower,
 So that by the end of the day the most common refrain

Among all of us,
 Aside from ‘*oh-god, cramp!*’ and ‘*Water!*’ and ‘*I’m not gonna
 Make the time-cut!*’ is ‘*is this climate change? Why is it 90degrees
 At 4800ft?*’”

Stage 2, more of the same, same heat, same struggle, same push,
 This time four mountains, including Col De Vars at 2200m or 8800ft.
 “*Why??*” I remember Sally asking me.
 “*Yeah, good question,*” I’m thinking.
 Except I’m not really wondering.
 And that’s because the struggle here teaches
 Me how to hold the struggle elsewhere in my life and in yours,
 Teaching me that only way over is through...no skirting the hurt,
 No going around the pain, no giving in or up,
 Because while I don’t believe in the hallmark hype that God doesn’t
 Give us anything more than we can handle,
 I do believe we have a strength in us and a resilience in us
 We too often never discover.

“*Grit it out,*” says Nicole, the nursing mom, as she spins past
 Me in the most beautiful cadence you have ever seen,
 Grit a great word for what’s at hand as I finish Stage 2,
 And then Stage 3 and then stage 4,
 Grit meaning ‘*strength of character, courage,*’
 And courage, from the Latin ‘*Cor,*’ meaning having heart,
 Meaning full of heart.

And so that's what I do, summon my grit,
Summon my heart, as I climb up Col de Galibier, 9000ft,
The last 2km at 15% gradient on stage 5,
The same way you summon your heart, your courage, I have seen you –
Cathie losing Michael last year,
Jim and Sabrina losing their little boy Kyle last year,
Dwight losing Pat two years ago,
Sally fighting cancer,
Jeff losing Nancy and then parenting two teens on his own, now grown
women, one of them, Meghan, now a new mom,
And Katie and Molly and Terry and Darrah and Cathleen and Trese
afflicting the comfortable with their racial justice work in our congregation,
And Heather summoning heart as protests with clergy collar on against
The gas pipeline in West Roxbury, challenging me and us to stand up
And be counted,
And our NOLA team getting proximate to trouble again in 6 weeks' time,
And so many others of you, too many name,
Practicing grit, summoning heart, showing courage
And beautiful cadence on the steep gradients of life, on behalf of others....,

The good news, the gospel news, that in a culture and country
That celebrates the 'me' over the 'we,'
We can pace each other, help each other, telling each other,
Helping each to 'grit it out.'

Air thin now at the top, my heart rate well over my threshold,
Meaning: I need to recover. Sabbath is like that too, sometimes.

You come here to recover, to not just get afflicted out of your comfort,
But to find comfort from the afflictions.

Yeah, I get it.

And do you know how sometimes in your life you are so focused
On summoning your grit, your eyes on the road 3ft ahead of you,
That you forget to look up and look around, take it in?
Which is what happened to me on Stage 6,
until I got to the top of Courchevel, 1850m,
and look right over the miles and miles of sky
and mountain upon mountains and valley....and it hits me.

What hits me?

I'm not sure, exactly, except that would you believe

That I'm crying?

I'm crying. The guy who only cries in children's movies

In the dark of the cinema,

And, I realize as I look out, the magnificence overwhelming me,

The guy who hasn't cried once since my younger brother died one year

Ago from an opiate overdose,

Somehow the emotions buried so deep in me,

But now, after grit, after summoning heart, are finally free.

Finally free.

I'm sure there are easier ways to summon heart.

Some of you, for example, tell me all about your gardening.

Which is why our gospel also offers this:

That never in this life have we been promised protection from pain.

Never believe the lie that being pious or devout or a ‘good UU’
Will grant you protection from the messes, or ramp down the roads,
Or keep you safe.
But what our good news does promise is presence, company,
Ministers, congregation, the God that I believe in that is less ‘noun’
As in ‘thing,’ and more ‘verb’ as in ‘actions, experiences.’

Stage 7 into Geneva, the ride’s benediction, the race’s final
Blessing given to me in the form of strong legs and a tail wind
And 22-speed heart (because that’s how many gears my two wheels have).
I could tell you where I finished in the pack (middle),
I could tell you that I just barely finished ahead of Nicole,
But then she had been up the previous night before with a crying baby,
So who’s the one with true grit?

I could show you my finisher medal...or my Mamil jersey...
But this sermon is less about what I did with my summer vacation,
And more about how we the good news of our faith
Can push us over hills, and give us the gears to keep us from spinning
Down, down and down.
You have heart? Summon it
You have good news? Tell it.
You want to live in and not just look at the world? Do it.
‘Grit it out,’ may not be a prayer we read in scripture.
But after this summer it’s mine to you:
Summon your heart, have courage, show your strength
Of character in a world that needs from us nothing less.

