

**AT HOME IN THE UNIVERSE**  
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**University Congregational Church**  
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Reading: “Markings” Dag Hammarskjöld

“So rests the sky against the earth. The dark still tarn in the lap of the forest. As a husband embraces his wife’s body in faithful tenderness, so the bare ground and trees are embraced by the still, high, light of the morning.

I feel an ache of longing to share in this embrace, to be united and absorbed. A longing like carnal desire, but directed towards earth, water, sky, and returned by the whispers of the trees, the fragrance of the soil, the caresses of the wind, the embrace of water and light. Content? No, no, no – but refreshed, rested – while waiting.”<sup>1</sup>

This is the time of the year when many people make major changes in their lives. Students have graduated from high school and college, moving out to advance their education or enter their careers. Some faculty members will be moving off to other universities in search of a tenure track position. Ministers are moving to new congregations. Many corporations move their employees at this time of the year so that their children can enter new schools in the fall. The average American will hold about eleven different jobs in his or her career. Personally, I have lived in six different states and ten different cities since I left home for college.

We are a nation of people perpetually on the move. Fewer people today still live in the same city they were born in. Our families are spread

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in *The Earth Speaks*, Steve Van Matre and Bill Weiler, eds. (Warrenville: Institute for Earth Education, 1983), 48.

across the continent and about the only thing that brings us together is the death of a parent. Americans have moved to the suburbs and that requires the average person to spend four years of his or her life in an automobile commuting to work, recreation sites, and shopping centers. And even though we give these suburbs endearing names like “Pecan Grove” we have not managed to make them neighbor hoods. A hood is a covering, and neighborhoods are those places where neighbors are protected and neighborliness is sheltered.

In the meantime our sense of space is further complicated by globalization. We now depend on global markets and a global economy. We certainly are aware of events around the world as quickly as they happen. And we even talk about the global village though I am not convinced that we have the village part down yet. Villages suggest a level of intimacy, even security, which we have not yet achieved through instant communication and supersonic travel.

My perception is that, by and large, we are an uprooted and disparate nation. We have houses but our souls are homeless. We have colleagues and associates but few friends. We have chat rooms but parlor room or dinner table conversation is a lost art. We have email but can no longer correspond. We can send more words more quickly across greater expanses

of space than ever before, but I am not sure we really have very much to say to each other. The average American male has twelve “sex partners” in his lifetime, but I wonder, “How many lovers?”

I think that we are very much like the character Nasruddin. In an old Sufi tale Nasruddin is sitting with his friend in a café drinking tea. They are talking about life and love. His friend asks him, “Nasruddin, how come you never got married?”

Nasruddin replies, “To tell you the truth, I spent my entire youth looking for the perfect woman. In Cairo I met a beautiful and intelligent woman with eyes like dark olives, but she was unkind to me. In Baghdad I met a woman who had wonderful and generous soul, but we had no interests in common. One woman after another would seem just right, but there would always be something not quite right about them. Then one day I met her, the perfect woman. She was beautiful, intelligent, generous, and kind. We had everything in common. She was perfect!”

“Well,” asks Nasruddin’s friend, “what happened to her? Why didn’t you marry her?”

Sipping his tea, Nasruddin replies to his friend, “Because she was looking for the perfect man.”

Like Nasruddin, we do not seem able to find the perfect mate, the perfect job, the perfect church, or the perfect community. We do not sense a connection with life. There is little harmony and our sense of place and people is often distorted. We are not able to engage in a partnership with life because we are looking for perfection.

Can you imagine being at home in the universe? Can you imagine the capacity to experience wonder and a primal sense of connection with life? Is it possible that, like the Shakers, we could be content “to come down where we ought to be?” Or, as Dag Hammarskjöld suggested, we long to be united and absorbed.

Helen M. Luke tells another Sufi tale in her book, *The Way of Woman*. It is about a caravan of men and camels who crossed a desert and reached a place where they expected to find water. Instead they found only a hole going deep into the earth. They lowered bucket after bucket into the hole, but each time the rope came back empty – no water and no bucket. They then began to lower men into the hole, but the men, too, disappeared off the end of the rope. Finally a wise man among the party volunteered to go down into the hole in search of water.

When the wise man reached the bottom of the hole, he found himself face to face with a horrible monster. The wise man thought to himself, “I

can't hope to escape from this place, but I can at least remain aware of everything I am experiencing." The monster said to him, "I will let you go only if you answer my question.

The wise man said, "Ask your question."

The monster said, "Where is the best place to be?"

The wise man thought, "I don't want to hurt his feelings. If I name some beautiful city, he may think I'm disparaging his hometown. Or maybe this hole is the place he thinks is best."

The wise man said, "The best place to be is wherever you feel at home – even if it is a hole in the ground."

The monster replied, "You are so wise that I will not only let you go, but I will also free the foolish men who came down before you. I will even release the water in this well."

How is it possible for us to feel at home in this spinning, mobile, and imperfect global village? How can we feel at home wherever we are? I would like to focus on one aspect of being at home in the universe.

We begin to feel at home in the universe when we are at home with ourselves. There is a middle way of understanding ourselves that does not rush to the extreme of isolated individuals whose destiny is social pathology or the other extreme of personal and social diffusion that results in

schizophrenia. I certainly believe in personal boundaries and the necessity of self-differentiation. People and their families become very dysfunctional when individuals cannot self-differentiate.

But fundamental to a balanced sense of self, and our home in the universe, is the understanding that the essence of the human being is other human beings. The self is communal in nature. The self is differentiated in the context of community. By community I mean both human society and natural society.

The fact of the matter is that my existence is a result of community. To begin with, my physical existence is a result of a long line of family lineage. I know that on my father's side my roots can be traced to eleventh century Scotland. On my mother's side by roots go back to ninth century French Huguenots. And with those chromosomes come many traditions and values that are militantly Protestant, deeply political, hard working to a fault, often provincial but utilitarian, and distrustful of institutional authority. As an individual I am but a continuum of biology and community.

For better and worse our families, our schools, our churches, our communities, and deep tectonic plates of culture shape the self we call "me". In community we find our connection with life. In community we are able to hew power in ways that protect and sustain us. In community we can

change the world. Marge Piercy's poem, "The Low Road" from *The Moon is Always Female* wrote:

Two people can keep each other  
sane, can give support, conviction,  
love, massage, hope, sex.  
Three people are a delegation,  
a committee, a wedge. With four  
you can play bridge and start  
an organization. With six  
you can rent a whole house,  
eat pie for dinner with no  
seconds, and hold a fund raising party.  
A dozen make a demonstration.  
A hundred fill a hall.  
A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter;  
ten thousand, power and your own paper;  
a hundred thousand, your own media;  
ten million, your own country.  
It goes on one at a time,  
it starts when you care  
to act, it starts when you do  
it again after they said no,  
it starts when you say We  
and know who you mean, and each  
day you mean one more.

When we look deeply into ourselves we realize the presence of all others. We realize that everyone and everything around us is our home. They constitute our being and we can be at home in their presence. Without others we would be quickly annihilated. Without others there would be no self to differentiate or define.

That suggests to me that we define ourselves as others. It introduces the possibility that our dignity is safeguarded to the extent that we protect the dignity of others. Our security is preserved when the security of others is immune. Our freedom is vouchsafed when democracy is universal. We can only know true prosperity when everyone is economically fortified. I think this is what Jesus meant when he said, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” and “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

We are like two brothers, one of whom was recently married. As he settled into the joy and security of a family he began to think about his brother. “My poor brother,” he thought. “He does not enjoy the comforts of a wife and the blessings of our growing wealth. One day he will grow old and have no wife or children to care for him. I can not let him fall into such poverty.”

So each night, when everyone was asleep, he slipped out of bed. He went to his storehouse and gathered up some of the bounty he had harvested that day. It might be grains or vegetables or dairy products. With stealth he would go to his brother’s storehouse and deposit his gifts.

At the same time the other brother began to think about his newly married brother. He worried that providing for a wife and children was a great financial burden, and a drought or invasion of insects would destroy



his brother and family. So each night, when everyone was asleep, he slipped out of bed. He went to his storehouse and gathered up some of the bounty he had harvested that day. It might be grains or vegetables or dairy products. With stealth he would go to his brother's storehouse and deposit his gifts.

Over time both brothers were amazed that no matter how much each gave to his brother their own storehouse was abundant. Then one night as each carried a large sack of wheat to the other's barn they bumped into each other. For a moment they were startled at finding the other. They broke out into laughter at the joy of the other's generosity. And they continued the practice for the rest of their lives, in seasons of plenty as well as scarcity. And when they died they died with peace in their hearts.

We are at home in the universe when we are able to recognize ourselves in the midst of others. We are at home in the universe when the well being of others is unquestionably established. We are at home in the universe when we know how to create community wherever we are. In community we can encourage one another, strengthen one another, and we can learn from one another. In community we make the discovery that each of us is part and parcel of the other. The universal currents that Emerson spoke of run through us all – from me to you and back again. The Zen

master Uchiyama Roshi wrote about his own teacher: “Sawaki Roshi often said that a monastery is like a charcoal fire in a hibachi. If you put in just one little coal, it will go out right away. But if you gather many small coals, each glowing just a little bit, then the fire will flare up...”<sup>2</sup>

I have often said that the search for community is the main reason that people join a congregation. They will tolerate insufferable committee meetings. They will manage to occupy themselves during sermons that are marginal and irrelevant. They will even participate in rituals they often think are outdated or meaningless. They will do all of this and more if they can find an authentic community of human beings that is willing to hold hands with them and walk down the path of life. Let this congregation be that place where we can walk together. Let it be that community where each one of us ignites the other in the warm glow of acceptance and growth. May we be the kind of community where people find a home and are welcomed to it.

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<sup>2</sup> Uchiyama, K. *Opening the Hand of Thought*, Arkana/Penguin Books; London: 1993, p. 183.