

Rev. Robert S. Slater, Minister Emeritus  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lynn  
August 29, 2004

August the 29<sup>th</sup>! Where has the summer gone? To paraphrase an old song: “Noticing the days hurrying by, when it’s summertime, my how they fly.” (At least that’s the way it seems to me.)

But what I want to talk about is the way, maybe only once or twice in our lives, a remarkable event or experience intrudes its way into our life and quite unexpectedly propels us in a new direction. It can be a kind of re-birth.

There was old Abraham, living quietly with his family and other relatives, confidently tending his flocks, when what he came to believe was the voice of God directed him to turn his life all upside down, abandon his home, his pastoral way of life, leave his father and many of his other relatives, gather up his possessions and head off to a land far to the west (which he had never seen before) and start a new life. There he would become founder of a great nation and live in what we have come to call he promised land.

Today, three major religions of the west all look to Abraham as their spiritual ancestor. The Israelis, these thousands of years later, clinging to their promised land. The Palestinians believing they have been forcibly and unjustly displaced from their ancestral lands and locked in bitter dispute with Israel.

Obviously only a few are ever the recipients of such a monumental experience effecting the lives of millions long after. But I believe that when each of us looks back over the decades of our life, we can see, here and there, an event or experience that has been a powerful influence for us; maybe nothing to make the newspaper headlines, but still lifting us out of a life of dull habit and repetition and relative meaninglessness and helping us to a more significant existence. Can we call it the hand of Providence? Perhaps. I think it can be instructive to examine these and shed some light on the future course of our lives.

As I look back over my 76 years, a year and a vacation stand out. First the year. You could describe my early years as a straight line, lived by the book. Grammar school, high school, two summers working on a farm, one at a small boat yard, another at a ship yard (leaving me with a little asbestos in my lungs). And when it came to being drafted or enlisting, I joined the United States Coast Guard. Next college, and a part time job at a trucking company. Nothing unusual here.

Then along came 1950. I had joined the college wrestling team, and at the start of the second season I dislocated my left shoulder. Maybe not a lucky break exactly. But it was a lucky dislocation. While recuperating I got restless and wanted something to do. A friend kept after me to become a dance teacher at the Arthur Murray Dance Studio, where business was booming. But that was ridiculous. I knew nothing at all about dancing. But he said they preferred it that way, no bad habits to fix. He kept nagging me, and Arthur Murray did manage to teach me to dance and even teach dancing. It gave me a lifetime hobby to start with. But even better, it was there that I met and married Robin, the best decision I have ever made. And my life was changed in another major way. The dance director persuaded me to read the book *THERE IS A RIVER*, the life story of Edgar Cayce. Just reading it gave me a brand new understanding of religion—

and life—and other religions beyond my own orthodox brand. It also started me meditating a practice I have continued these many years. And it gave me a diet to eat by and live by, one given 70 and 80 and 90 years ago, that is finding fresh scientific confirmation every day, even by the Federal government—no or very little white flour or white refined sugar, white potatoes, fried food, carbonated drinks etc. Easy on red meat, with a heavy emphasis on fruits and vegetables of a variety of colors, fish, olive oil, lots of water, etc. And exercise outdoors.

Then one Sunday, in view of my new liberal religious views, Robin suggested we attend the First Unitarian Church in Baltimore. Believe it or not, by the time we walked out of church, I had come to two major decisions: I had decided to become a member of that church, and also a minister of the church.

All of which goes to tell you how it has come about that I am here, far from Baltimore, at this church service here in Swampscott, a retired and former minister of *this* church.

But so much for 1950 and the way it changed my life forever.

They say travel is broadening. I found that out, and in working on this sermon I had to laugh when I saw a feature article in Arthur Frommer's *Budget Travel* magazine, "Five Trips that Can Change Your Life." One trip did it for me. First a little background.

By 1994 Robin's health had been declining for several years. But then on March 14 it took a sudden and alarming plunge for the worse. When Robin got out of bed, she had almost no memory, she was severely agitated and deeply confused—just like that. Things only got worse. At McLean Hospital her condition was described as probable Alzheimer's Disease with a bi-polar disorder. Of course there was no cure in medical science.

So as soon as I recovered a little from the shock I turned to the only possible source of help: that suggested in the book which had already changed my life. Outdoor exercise, diet, affirmations, massage therapy, and chiropractic adjustments, all of which I managed pretty well. And then there were various specialized treatments that I have managed at maybe 50%. Over the next few years Robin's general health improved remarkably. But her memory problems and her severe agitation continued. She couldn't stand still.

This limited our lives drastically. No eating out, no public transportation, no travel of any distance, no sitting down and relaxing almost anywhere, such as a doctor's office or even at home. We settled down to a boring existence, certainly for me. I have to be active and mentally challenged. We walked, but that was about the only thing we could do together that we enjoyed and after walking the streets of Lynn hundreds and even thousands of times, and the entire area all around here, I got desperate and decided that I just had to take a chance and expand my horizons somehow. Even to try the unthinkable. Of course Robin hated anything like being confined to one spot, and above all, being strapped in place. But I decided to try flying somewhere. And of course I would try it when almost everybody else was hunkered down at home: January of 2002. I figured that was the safest time.

The destination was dictated by that one thing Robin and I could do together: walking. I wanted it to be an interesting place to walk. My final choice was Las Vegas, which is a most interesting place to walk.

Because of Robin's condition, going anywhere overnight is like going on a Safari. But before I knew it, we were there at Logan: Me with a huge backpack on my back, a large cool bag over my right shoulder, a small cool bag over my left, pulling a suitcase with wheels with my right hand, carrying a filled shopping bag with my left, and holding Robin's right arm with my left arm.

When the people at Logan's security saw Robin (constantly in motion), it was easy to see they were worried. They demanded to know if she could make the flight. But summoning all the self confidence I could muster, I assured them that once we were seated she would be OK. And amazingly enough, when we were seated, Robin did manage to make it somehow. The fact that we had the bulkhead seats) with no in front for her to bother) helped.

Once in Las Vegas the little miracles continued. The city that never sleeps. Lots of free entertainment indoors and out. Neon lights everywhere. Glittery and glamorous hotels and casinos. New York, Venice, Arabia, Ancient Rome, Egypt, all there. Changing every year. And we walked: the main street, Las Vegas Boulevard, the strip, over and over again. The entire six-mile round trip a couple of times. But finally I decided we just had to have help and try the trolley and bus. It wasn't easy, but again, we made it. And it gave me the courage to try the free two-hour bus ride to Laughlin, the town in southern Nevada where the low rollers go. Again, somehow, it wasn't smooth, but we made it. A free meal came along with the bus ride. We hadn't eaten out in years; the last time we tried Robin almost upset the table. But it was free, nothing to lose except a table or two. And somehow we had a meal out. I learned that the keys to our eating out were an all-you-can-eat buffet (food for Robin immediately with no nerve-racking wait) and one with booths, where I can sit down beside Robin and slide her in, and no table to overturn. (And surprisingly enough, these days she often relaxes through an entire meal.)

Now the point of all this is not so much that experience in Las Vegas, which I enjoyed—something different, variety, that gave me a psychological boost—but how it changed my subsequent life. We started taking the MBTA everywhere: Quincy, Harvard Square, Riverside, the Chestnut Hill Mall, all over. We started to eat out twice a week, now in Medford, the only local all-you-can-eat buffet, and by being very careful in our food selection we manage to stick to our diet.

And we have continued to fly, all over the place, even Waikiki, Paradise as they call it, the two of us, in April 2002, roundtrip with transfers and seven nights in a hotel for a grand total of \$1,150. Can you believe it?

It's strange how life (or providence or the hand of God) can work well. I can't begin to tell you how much it has meant to me to become free of our previous limitations and rejoin the world.

How is it that events or experiences can come into our lives like that and turn them all around, if we let them, if we are open to the possibility, if we are willing to take a chance and explore the possibilities?

Well, just for a moment, permit me to sound like a TV commercial. Is your life boring? Have you settled back into a pointless routine? Are you stuck in a rut? Does your life lack meaning?

The answer may lie in examining a few of the ways people have started a new life.

Of course there are the few examples that have survived the centuries. The rare ones. Abraham. Paul on the road to Damascus. A persecutor of Christians and off to do more. When, according to the Book of Acts, a light flashed all around him, and he fell to the ground, dazed. And when he got up, he was a changed man.

On a small scale, for me it was a dislocation that led to a book which changed the future course of my life, and a vacation taken out of desperation that has made a tremendous difference in my current life.

Some years ago I read or heard someone say it, I can't remember exactly. But it was this: Listen, pay attention, because you never know when it might be the voice of God. Now I don't know if I take this literally, but since then I have taken it seriously. You never know. You overhear someone say something in a casual conversation, a chance remark, that may be the voice of God in a sense, speaking to you. Just triggering another thought entirely in your mind. The classic example of this is the man we call St. Augustine. He was born in North Africa in 354 a.d., and was what the Christians called a pagan. But more than that, he was a young man who was wasting his brilliant intellectual talents as a drunkard and womanizer. Then one day he overheard a child in the yard next to his, just casual words that were not directed to him, but words that somehow went right to his heart, and then-and-there turned his life around. He went on to become a bishop, and the producer of many of the great writings of Christianity. Listen. What you may hear may be the voice of God.

Then there are those people who hear opportunity knocking on their door and they have sense enough to get up and answer the knock. A few weeks ago a Sunday newspaper carried the all-too-familiar story of an African American teenager, living in a ghetto in New York City, apparently destined to become a victim of that ghetto and all its evils and die an early death—like many of his friends. Then what would seem a most unlikely opportunity for him came along: a chance to join a fencing program. How many people become interested in fencing these days? And fewer still by far African Americans? But he joined and became highly proficient at fencing, which lifted him out of all the limitations and dangers of his former life, and gave him a fresh start that carried him to the Olympics in Greece.

Listen for a knock on the door. It may be opportunity. Remember, you never know, you might hear the voice of God speaking to you right here in this three-dimensional world. The next book you read might be the one that will make a difference in your life. The next departure you make from your old tired routines may be the one that adds sparkle and zest to your life.

You never know when an event or experience may intrude its way into your life and propel you into a step forward in this pilgrimage that we call life. Be ready.