The View from the Heartland

September 18, 2005

"To know the universe itself as a road--as many roads--as roads for traveling souls."
-Walt Whitman

This past summer my son Ben and I took a long road trip out to the Badlands and Black Hills of South Dakota. Many of you know that Ben graduated from college in the spring and this fall is starting a new job teaching and coaching at a private school in Connecticut: a more bittersweet occurrence in my life than I had expected. I thought this last summer before his work began might be an opportunity--I hope not the last, but who knows?--for the two of us to spend some, as they say, "quality" time together.

Along the way, we stopped at Niagara Falls and in Chicago, crossed the mighty Mississippi at LaCrosse, Wisconsin, which has become one of my favorite places along the journey westward, and spent a couple of days in and around Hanska, Minnesota, the location of my first congregation.

Ben was born when we lived in Minnesota, and maybe it was those early trips back and forth from Minnesota to Maine that gave him the "road trip" bug. The first book to really get his attention was Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. At any rate, both of us enjoy hitting the open road and watching the miles go by, and in my opinion no respectable road trip begins until you cross the Mississippi River.

You climb up the steep bluffs on the western bank of the Mississippi, and when you emerge at the top you are on the prairie, pure and simple. I love the views from Interstate 90 in Southeastern Minnesota. There is an openness that seems to lift the weight of the world off my shoulders.

Not that I felt that way when I lived out there, trying to balance the demands of my early marriage, my first church, and my first child. One of the regrets I live with is that I didn't do such a great job of that balancing act, and that I wasn't able to live more in the moment during those brief years in Hanska and in the life of my young son, when I was serving what was then called the Nora Free Christian Church, Unitarian.

"Nora" is a diminutive of Norway. The Nora Unitarian Universalist Church, as it is now known, was originally founded by the Norwegian Kristofer Janson, a renegade Lutheran pastor who

became a Unitarian missionary to the Norwegian immigrants in the upper Midwest. Never mind all the *non-sequitors* in the sentence. (The church services in the Nora Church were conducted in Norwegian until the late 1940's. The town of Hanska is strangely similar to Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon).

Suffice it to say that the Nora Church stands in one of the most magical settings of any church anywhere, a small, oak tree shaded hill surrounded by miles of open prairie, which just happens to be the highest point in Brown County, Minnesota. Native American remains have been found buried there.

On top of the hill is a cemetery full of Norwegians and a few Swedes, remarkably all of them Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists in a land of Lutherans and German Catholics. Just below the top of the hill stands the little neo-gothic church, built in the 1880's. It originally stood at the top on the site of the cemetery, but a tornado blew it away in 1883, making pretty good journalistic fodder for the Lutherans in the area who were convinced that it was an act of God. (When shortly afterward a tornado destroyed a Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, their ardor cooled a bit.)

Right next to the church is the parsonage, and that is where Ben began his life twenty-two and a half years ago. One of the photographs from our trip shows Ben standing in front, right where we have many photos taken during the first two and half years of his life. Talk about nostalgia.

Ben and I spent the better part of a morning exploring around the church, me telling him stories about people and things which he, of course, could not remember, and visiting with the newly settled minister there, Don Rollins, an old acquaintance from my UU days in Maine.

It was wonderful and sad to walk around the cemetery, to stand behind the pulpit in the church (originally from the Unity Church in St. Paul, and used by former American Unitarian Association President Frederick May Eliot before his elevation to the Presidency), and to visit with Don in the parsonage where Sabrina, Ben, and I lived for three years. The intensity of my memories that day was a reminder of the intensity of those years in Hanska, the first place I had ever lived outside of New England, the first church I had ever served. So many of the beautiful folks I knew there have passed on into the great mystery, their journeys of life over,--at least so far as we, with our limited instruments, can tell.

Our two days in Minnesota were spent with old and dear friends from our time there, then it was on to South Dakota and the Badlands National Park. Before leaving Minnesota, though, we stopped for a visit at the Jeffers Petroglyphs which date back 5000 years. If that doesn't humble you, nothing ever will. We spent a couple of hours walking the site and taking pictures of stone carvings dating from the days when people still hunted bison with atlatls.

For those who think of the Great Plains as boring, only to passed through as quickly as possible on the way to somewhere, anywhere, else, I highly recommend a road trip to South Dakota. The light, the vast perspectives, the sky, *everything* is bigger and brighter, and expansiveness is the order of the day. Crossing the Missouri River in Chamberlain, you can actually see the dividing line between the tall and short grass prairies, and the beginning of the true west: a harsher and much dryer and more treeless environment than that to the east.

Because Ben studied geology and will be teaching it this year, we spent a lot of time taking pictures of geologic formations, and there are few places in the United States with more geologically interesting features than the Badlands and the Black Hills of South Dakota. We spent one night camping in the Badlands (discovering an absolutely huge spider under our tent in the morning--an arachnophobe's nightmare), then headed on to the Black Hills, where we spent several more days camping and hiking and exploring in that beautiful and sacred part of the country. We visited the surprisingly fascinating Geology Museum at the South Dakota School of Mines and shopped at Prairie Edge, one of the best places in the country to buy Plains Indians arts and crafts. As my younger son Josh and I had done several years ago, Ben and I climbed Harney Peak, known to the native Lakota people as the *paha sapa*, the most sacred place in their sacred geography. To us Anglos, it is the highest point between the Rockies and the Pyrenees, and the views are spectacular.

One is always reminded in the Black Hills and in South Dakota in general, or ought to be, of the awful cost exacted by the white settlement of the American West. Residual reminders are everywhere, in the terrible poverty and despair of the reservations, in the names of towns like "Custer," in the exhausted gold mines which fueled not only the western migration, but the near extermination of the native peoples of the west--a former day holocaust.

This memory and its terrible legacy of violence and greed and injustice must be part of any view from the heartland, but I fear that for many living in our country today, it is not. We don't know our literature and we don't know our history. We don't know our own story! We are not the innocents on the world stage that many claim us to be. I wanted Ben to think about this, so part of our journey included a long, hot (over 100 degrees) detour through the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, and past the site of the 1890 Wounded Knee "massacre" (the US government has finally recognized it as such, not just as a "battleground" as the signs there used to say). It's also where the American Indian Movement made its tragic stand in 1973, which finally brought some attention to the miserable plight of 20th century native Americans. Unfortunately, that history does not have a very prominent place, if any, in most of our textbooks.

Ben and I are both a little reticent when it comes to talking a lot, so we had plenty of time for contemplation and introspection. I spent a lot of time during those endless prairie miles wondering what has become of the heart of my country. Not that there are not wonderful,

generous people out there on the plains: some of the nicest people I have ever known are from Minnesota and Iowa! But there is a mean-spirtedness and isolationism everywhere in this country that is perhaps more palpable in rural America and that has only been exacerbated in recent years by punditry and preaching and spin and what passes for journalism.

Sad to say, much of that mean-spiritedness has been promulgated in recent years by religion. I spent a lot of time thinking about the power of the symbols and of the language we use, and about how these shape us and our understanding of what it means to be an American. I recognize that I have begun to have a not-completely-rational aversion for flags, for crosses, for certain biblical texts and figures, and for religious language which claims to be inclusive but is in fact terribly divisive. In "the heart of the heart of the country," as novelist William Gass once called it, the cultural hegemony of conservative sectarian Protestantism is almost stifling. I blanche every time I hear the United States referred to as "a Christian nation," such a misunderstanding or intentional misrepresentation it is of the origins of our country and our Constitution. As things stand today, the Nora Unitarian Universalist Church, and anything resembling it, has little chance of surviving anywhere in rural America, and that is a shame, if not an imminent danger.

In our country, and not for the first time, God has become confused with patriotism. In a recent article in the Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Charles Marsh, a professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia, writes that

American patriotism has become a cult of self-worship consecrated by court prophets robed in pin-striped suits. Forgetting the crucial difference between discipleship to Jesus Christ and loyalty to nation, the God most Americans trust is a simulacrum of the holy and righteous God, a reification of the American way of life. . . . We have seen Christian Coalition activists in Ohio holding high a cross with the words "Bush-Cheney" painted in red across white beams, and we have heard the chilling new catechisms of American Christendom--"Our God is pro-war," said Jerry Falwell--and we find ourselves unable to imagine any pubic argument capable of restoring integrity and depth to the sacred symbols of the faith.

Once upon a time, and not so long ago, immigrants from all over Europe flooded into the Great Plains to make a new beginning. They may have been poor and ignorant when they arrived, but they had no intention of staying that way. They were remarkably well informed and hardworking and they were committed to creating a system of education which would insure a better life for their children. The farm people who gathered the Nora Free Christian Church in 1881 didn’t want the religion of the old country or its priests and ministers. They were here to make a new start, they were here for freedom, and that meant in the choice of their religion, too.

Today we have regressed to a kind of narrowness and xenophobia that belies the fact that all of us originally came from somewhere else. Most "America Firsters" scare me. There is a cultural and religious and racial and political homogeneity in much of the heartland that saddens, frightens, and depresses me. In spite of the heartland's beginnings with 19th century immigrants, diversity, multi-culturalism, and pluralism are not especially popular subjects there these days, a giant historical and cultural disconnect if ever there was one. You can of course find pockets of enlightenment. It is those pockets that give me hope.

But I worry about the great heart of our country. In light of the too often mean-spirited debates around issues like same-sex marriage, in light of the terrible poverty existing in our midst and exposed by hurricane Katrina, in light of the apparent fragility of our social fabric and the growing gulf between rich and poor, in light of our failed or at least flawed foreign policy, in light of increased attacks on our civil liberties, in light of our oil-dependent lifestyle, in light of our inability to come to terms with our religious diversity, we need to begin to look into the heart of America and ask if this is really the kind of country or the kind of people we want to be.

It was wonderful to spend some time with my son and to have the leisure to think about these things, troubling though they may be. It was good to revisit the scenes of former days, and to realize how far the journey has taken me.

One of the great metaphors for the religious life is, of course, the journey or pilgrimage. As the poet Walt Whitman knew, all roads are "roads for traveling souls." The universe itself is a road, he said. So suffice it to say that I definitely believe road trips can be religious experiences!

The great 20th century Roman Catholic theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once wrote that, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." As spiritual beings, we should know that there is no journey that is not a journey into the self, a journey toward God, a journey toward ultimate reality, wherever it may reside. May our journey of life bring us closer together, and may it lead us toward a more enlightened view of ourselves and of our world. And may the view from the heartland, wherever that may be, grow ever wider, ever more expansive, and ever more steadily toward the light. Amen.

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