

May Sarton and Me
(Embarking on Sabbatical)
August 28, 2011

A couple of weeks ago, on a Thursday – my day off, I drove out to Pasadena and picked up my grandson to take him out to lunch. While we were eating, I said something about how nice it was to have this day off so I could hang out with him. And Josh said, “Isn’t every day except Sunday really your day off?”

I was so stunned by that perception that I could barely respond – other than to keep saying, “Oh, no...no, that’s not true; oh my god, no...no!” Finally I suggested that the reason he thought I have six days off every week was because he sees me do so much of my work at home – and then probably somewhat defensively, I began listing all the things ministers do on days other than Sundays.

The Rev. Brandy Lovely – former minister for many years of Neighborhood Church in Pasadena, and one of my mentors throughout my ministry – used to remind congregations that ministers are expected to excel in probably more areas than any other profession. We are to deliver a different inspirational sermon every week, and creating a worship service that seamlessly completes the sermon; we officiate at weddings, memorial services, child dedications and a variety of other “rites-of-passage” – some of which can be pretty – well, “unique!” We are to be a writer, counselor, teacher, administrator, supervisor of staff, fundraiser, storyteller, stand-up comic, activist, intellect; and to know something -- hopefully a lot -- about a variety of different subjects.

It is, I suspect, this complexity of ministry that is a large part of what we ministers love about it. I, for one, can get bored easily, and parish ministry is seldom boring!

But it can also be exhausting, and that is why our Unitarian Universalist denomination understands the need for ministers to get completely away from their ministry for a good chunk of time every few years, to allow ourselves a period of rest – to be like the trees described by May Sarton that “let go and go deep into their roots for renewal...”

It is why most UU ministers have as part of our agreement with our congregations the stipulation that after our first four years of service, we’re eligible to take one month of Sabbatical for every year served, up to six months.

In 2007, a couple of months before the end of my 5th year with Emerson, I took three months of sabbatical. And those of you who were here then will remember that after fighting my demons of “should” – I “should” do this; I “should” do that – I decided to simply use the time to re-connect with parts of my life that I had let go of long ago.

As part of that, I drove up the west coast and re-connected with friends and family members who I hadn't seen or spoken to, in some cases, for over forty years.

I decided to re-connect with my music by finding a piano teacher and taking piano practice seriously. I have a different teacher now, but I have continued to treat my piano practice as a daily spiritual practice.

But some of the other goals I had for that sabbatical – reading lots of books and magazine articles that had been stacking up, and cooking some recipes I'd cut out of various publications over the years – never got accomplished. I realized, sadly, that I had forgotten how to read just for pleasure, rather than for sermon ideas; and I learned on that sabbatical that I really don't like to cook!

So I guess sometimes what we learn by getting away and doing something completely different, is that not all of our plans for that time need to be realized; that sometimes, the gift we gain from setting a goal is to learn that we no longer need that goal.

Nevertheless, I do have some hopes for this new sabbatical.

I'll be driving across the country to the little town of Chatham on Cape Cod, where my younger sister and brother-in-law have a second home – an old house they're letting me stay in, for as long as I want – a perfect place to “let go and go deep.”

I'll be leaving sometime after the Labor Day weekend. I'm not sure yet what my route will be; Christy told me she deliberately chose Bobby Troup's “Route 66” for our Prelude music this morning, because she was imagining me driving along that highway to my destination! And actually, it has crossed my mind – just so I could say I'd done it!

I am hoping to see one last time my first piano teacher, Carrell Pray, who I visited last summer; she lives in Wisconsin – which is a ways off Route 66. She has Alzheimer's, and while she did remember me last summer – we were even able to play a Mozart duet together! – I don't know what her situation is by now.

And I'm also very eager to get to the Cape; I want some time there before it begins getting too cold; I want to sit on the beach that's two blocks away, and walk into town where the heart of Chatham is.

And I want to get started on my real goal for going there, and that's to write.

I come from a family of writers. My father and my uncle (on my mother's side) were originally newspaper reporters. And while my father went on to the world of advertising, and my uncle became a United States Congressman,

journalism never left their souls. Both men returned to writing newspaper columns in retirement.

So for years now I've wanted to do some serious writing that's *not* a 20-minute sermon; my dad used to nag me that I should write about my experiences in ministry. But I never seem to have the time necessary to accomplish that. So in a way, perhaps I'm honoring my father by setting aside this time to write – whether it's about my ministry, or something else.

And, I have to admit that despite what I said I learned on my last Sabbatical, I once again have this fantasy that I'm going to cook – with fresh vegetables purchased at the little market down the street that supports a local non-profit serving disabled citizens of the Cape.

In truth, my fantasy is that I'll be like May Sarton – a fellow Unitarian Universalist who loved to write. She lived a solitary life somewhere in New England that looked a lot like Cape Cod. And when I first read some of her journals during my Seminary days, I related to her struggles with anger, which she referred in her *Journal of a Solitude* to as “crippling, like a fit when they happen, and then, when they are over, haunting (her) with remorse.” I relate less to that these days, I am glad to say; but it is not entirely foreign.

Yet given how much time she devoted to gardening (which I'm not very good at), and how she *did* apparently like to cook (and I really don't!), it's more likely that the closest I'll get to her will be reading more of her journals and maybe even some of her novels; but *become* like her? Not likely!

So once again, I'm left with the reality that we are *all* left with: that I can only be myself. Perhaps that's what this Sabbatical ultimately will be about – learning who I've become at this stage in my life, and what that means for my ministry and my future. Perhaps it will be about learning “to sit still” – in the solitude of an old house, with the ocean nearby, and the silence that invites reflection and acceptance.

Isn't that what we all need – a good chunk of time to simply “sit still” and learn who we've become? And while I know most of you are not granted generous sabbaticals as we ministers are, I nevertheless pray that you create for yourself occasional “mini-sabbaticals” specifically for reflection and renewal.

I will be writing a short column each month for Emerson's newsletter, letting you know what I'm up to. But I won't know what's going on with you here at Emerson – as tempting as I will find that; I'm confident that Rev. Rivas, our other staff, and the lay leadership of this church, can handle any emergencies that arise.

But I will be very anxious to hear your stories – both individual and collective – upon my return in February. I know wonderful things will continue to happen here.

As always, I cannot begin to express my gratitude to all of you for supporting, first, the very idea of allowing me a sabbatical – five months, no less!; to welcome Rev. Rivas into your lives and the life of this church; and then to so enthusiastically support me as I embark on this new adventure. I am deeply touched by your expressions of love and faith.

I wish all of you would be granted sabbaticals, no matter your job. We all deserve, like the trees, to be able to “let go” and be renewed by going “deep into (our) roots.”

Now...I realized the other day that since I won't be here in November, you'll miss out on our annual Ben & Jerry's communion (with a small “c”) on the Sunday before Thanksgiving! And that didn't seem fair!

So I'm going to ask Krista to bring the ice cream out, and while Christy serenades us at the piano, I invite you to come forward and take a small spoonful of ice cream, and then return to your seats for our closing hymn and Benediction.

And remember...There's a luncheon afterwards, so don't pig out too much with the ice cream!