

## Homecoming Sunday September 7, 2008

Life in the barn was very good – night and day, winter and summer, spring and fall, dull days and bright days. It was the best place to be, thought Wilbur, this warm delicious cellar, with the garrulous geese, the changing seasons, the heat of the sun, the passage of swallows, the nearness of rats, the sameness of sheep, the love of spiders, the smell of manure, and the glory of everything.

- from *Charlotte's Web*, by E. B. White

### Opening Words

From the *Idaho Fish and Game News*, August 14, 2003

The big fish are back in Bear Valley, and they have to be tired. Swimming virtually non-stop for up to three years in the Pacific Ocean, Idaho's chinook salmon were suddenly ambushed by their native instinct, and compelled to return home. So on they came. Swimming across the Pacific, to the mouth the Snake River, and up the Snake to Idaho's Salmon River. Pressing on, through rapids and waterfalls, at last they arrived at Bear Valley Creek. It has been months since they started their journey and they have lost a third their body weight, but they are finally home.

### Reading

From "A Fist in the Eye of God," in *Small Wonder*, by Barbara Kingsolver

In the slender shoulders of the myrtle tree outside my kitchen window, a hummingbird built her nest. It was in April, the sexiest month, season of bud-burst and courtship displays, though I was at the sink washing breakfast dishes and missing the party, or so you might think. Then my eye caught a flicker of motion outside, and there she was, hovering uncertainly. She held in the tip of her beak a wisp of wadded spiderweb so tiny I wasn't even sure it was there, until she carefully smooched it onto the branch. She vanished then, but in less than a minute she was back with another tiny white tuft that she stuck on top of the first.

For more than an hour she returned again and again, increasingly confident of her mission, building up by infinitesimal degrees a whitish lump on the branch – and leaving me plumb in awe of the supply of spider-wedding on the face of the land. I stayed at my post, washing everything I could find, while my friend did her own housework out there.

When the lump had grown big enough – when some genetic trigger in her small brain said, "Now, that will do" – she stopped gathering and sat down on her little tuffet, wagging her wings and tiny rounded underbelly to shape the blob into a cup that would easily have fit inside my cupped hand. Then she hovered up to inspect it from this side and that, settled and waddled with greater fervor, hovered and appraised some more, and dashed off again.

She began now to return with fine filaments of shredded bark, which she wove into the webbing along with some dry leaflets and a slap-dab or two of lichen pressed onto the

outside for curb appeal. When she had made of all this a perfect, symmetrical cup, she did the most surprising thing of all: She sat on it, stretched herself forward, extended the unbelievable length of her tongue, and *licked* her new nest in a long upward stroke from bottom to rim. Then she rotated herself in minute degree, leaned forward, and licked again. I watched her go all the way around, licking the entire nest in a slow rotation that took ten minutes to complete and ended precisely back at her starting point.

Passed down from hummingbird great-grandmothers immemorial, a spectacular genetic map in her mind had instructed her at every step, from snipping out with her beak the first spiderweb tuft to laying down whatever salivary secretion was needed to accrete and finalize her essential creation.

Then, suddenly, that was that. Her busy urgency vanished, and she settled in for the long stillness of laying and incubation.

**Reflection: “Sanctuary”** © Rev. Sylvia Stocker

There was a certain irony in preparing remarks about “Sanctuary” during the celebrated Blue Angels’ visit – all while anticipating a deafening interlude at any moment. My house is just behind the Naval Air Station. When those jets fly over, the china shakes in the cabinet, my bones shake in my body, and my nerves become jangled .

My cat Molly scooches down and tries to run away, but, of course, there is nowhere to hide, no sanctuary.

What a terrible feeling, when there is no place to feel safe! For what is sanctuary, but safe haven? That is the first thing to say about sanctuary: It’s where we feel protected, embraced, and nurtured; it’s where we find shelter in the storm.

I suppose the Blue Angels have something to do with sanctuary, oddly enough. Our *country* is a sanctuary. In its mythology, though less in its actual practice, our country has been the safe haven many have sought, when fleeing oppression and poverty in other lands. Our Statue of Liberty is adorned with a plaque, containing those beautiful words, written by Emma Lazarus:

*Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.*

The military’s purpose is to protect our country. Even though that purpose can and does become warped, I imagine many of the young women and men who serve do so because they want to keep our country safe.

But today, on Homecoming Sunday, I imagine most of us seek a different sort of sanctuary – the sanctuary of welcoming religious community. So many have found

sanctuary in religious institutions through the ages – spiritual, emotional, even political sanctuary during troubled times.

Some of us have been a part of this church for years, decades, lifetimes even. Returning like those Chinook salmon churning up the Snake River, Homecoming Sunday may be an instinctual, visceral homeward call.

Some of us are new, perhaps here for the first time today. Seeking a spiritual home, we may be like the little boy's family planting the first crop of sunflowers or like the new mother hummingbird preparing for the miracle of creation.

Some of us may be facing certain seasons of our lives that propel us upstream to the kind of sanctuary that provides safe space for spiritual questioning and questing.

New and old -- together, may we create sacred space to nurture dreams and grow into our best selves. In varying ages and stages, together may we gather and sow the seeds to serve the generations and the tomorrows coming behind us.

Today we gather in this special room where we worship together, the room we call "sanctuary." This room holds our laughter and tears, our hopes and heartaches, our voices and our shared silences. This room calls us to community, the physical place where we experience and examine much of our spiritual seeking and growing. It is our sanctuary.

Yet here is a surprising truth. Sanctuary is not actually a place; it's a way of being.

Let me tell you a story. Three years ago, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. In its wake, three UU church buildings lay damaged and broken. Since then, our UU brothers and sisters have been reclaiming and rebuilding their sacred spaces. So I was surprised to learn one of our sister UU churches in New Orleans – Community Church – had to be demolished in August. New regulations require the church to rebuild on higher ground.

Stunning and sad pictures of the demolition are posted on Community Church's website, along with this description:

*"A crowd gathered... strangers passing by stopped to inquire. One gentleman became very passionate, saying that he loved that building, it was historical and beautiful, and he loved to look at it every day on his way to work, and he was distraught that it had to come down."*<sup>1</sup>

So now that historical, beautiful building is gone. But the congregation that has struggled through hurricanes and devastation still survives, still provides sanctuary for those who join them. Community Church worships in different space now, while their church is being rebuilt. But they still have sanctuary – the sanctuary of community built, not by hammers and nails, but by being together, loving together, and facing the future together.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://communitychurchuu.org/>

Reading their website, I was inspired by the messages of hope and strength that prevail there – hope and strength buoyed up by the spirit of the congregation.

True sanctuary can never be produced by a building or a room, much as we may feel attached to our surroundings.

Without the boy seeking a special space, the sunflowers would be simply sunflowers, not sanctuary.

Without the mother bird hatching her eggs and tending her chicks, the nest would simply be an amazing construction, not a sanctuary.

And without us, our hearts beating out a love song to the universe, our spirits expanding as we learn to be our best selves, and our arms embracing the weary, hopeful, questing, and imperfect souls who come to our shores and through our doors, this church would not be sanctuary. Insofar as our church is a sanctuary, we make it so.

Today, we launch a new church year. Let this be our vow: that we will seek and deepen love and offer it to our world, we will tend our spirits to become wellsprings of wisdom, and we will open our hearts to all seekers who enter our doors.

That is what it means to create sanctuary.

That is what it means to be sanctuary.

That is the true work, the heart and soul, of our church. Welcome home.