

September 9, 2018, Homecoming Sunday  
*Goats on the Tracks*

*Thought to ponder at the beginning:*  
Whoever saves a life saves the world entire.  
– The Talmud

**Opening Words and Chalice Lighting**     *The Book of Camp Branch*, by Wendell Berry

How much delight I've known  
in navigating down the flow  
by stepping stones, by sounding  
stones, by words that are  
stepping and sounding stones.  
Going down stone by stone,  
the song of the water changes,  
changing the way I walk  
which changes my thought  
as I go. Stone to stone  
the stream flows. Stone to stone  
the walker goes. The words  
stand stone still until  
the flow moves them, changing  
the sound - a new word -  
a new place to step or stand.

**Reading**

*Monet Refuses the Operation*, Lisel Muller

Doctor, you say there are no haloes  
around the streetlights in Paris  
and what I see is an aberration  
caused by old age, an affliction.  
I tell you it has taken me all my life  
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,  
to soften and blur and finally banish  
the edges you regret I don't see,  
to learn that the line I called the horizon  
does not exist and sky and water,  
so long apart, are the same state of being.  
Fifty-four years before I could see  
Rouen cathedral is built  
of parallel shafts of sun,  
and now you want to restore  
my youthful errors: fixed

notions of top and bottom,  
the illusion of three-dimensional space,  
wisteria separate  
from the bridge it covers.  
What can I say to convince you  
the Houses of Parliament dissolve  
night after night to become  
the fluid dream of the Thames?  
I will not return to a universe  
of objects that don't know each other,  
as if islands were not the lost children  
of one great continent.  
The world  
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,  
becomes water, lilies on water,  
above and below water,  
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow  
and white and cerulean lamps,  
small fists passing sunlight  
so quickly to one another  
that it would take long, streaming hair  
inside my brush to catch it.  
To paint the speed of light!  
Our weighted shapes, these verticals,  
burn to mix with air  
and change our bones, skin, clothes  
to gases.  
Doctor,  
if only you could see  
how heaven pulls earth into its arms  
and how infinitely the heart expands  
to claim this world, blue vapor without end.

**Sermon**

*Goats on the Tracks*

(c) Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

On Monday, August 20, a New York subway train operator placed an unusual phone call to the subway's command center. Two goats were roaming the tracks. Goats, right there in the middle of Brooklyn! Nobody knows how or why they got there. People speculate the goats may have escaped from a trip to a nearby slaughter house. And now the goats were spending their morning munching grass on the tracks between the Fort Hamilton Parkway and the 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue stops on the N train line. Fortunately that branch of the line was closed for repairs, so the goats didn't have to contend with an ongoing stream of subway cars. However, the goats did wander perilously close to the electrified third rail.

Within a couple of hours, the goats had been tranquilized, captured, and sent off to their new life: Jon Stewart and his wife, Tracey – both animal rights activists – picked up the goats to take them to their new home at Farm Sanctuary's shelter in Watkins Glen, NY, which rescues farm animals. Farm Sanctuary director Susie Coston said: “We don’t know where these animals came from but they have clearly not been handled kindly. The shape that they’re in, as dirty as they are, they definitely escaped from some place where they were most likely to be slaughtered. This boy’s ear has been cut straight off the tip. They’re still clinging together right now (out of fear).” (<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/msn/goats-rescued-from-subway-tracks-on-the-mend-at-cornell/ar-BBMIJrl>)<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup>(Coverage of Goats on the Tracks comes from:

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/msn/goats-rescued-from-subway-tracks-on-the-mend-at-cornell/ar-BBMIJrl>  
and

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/20/nyregion/goats-subway-track.html>

Animal lover that I am. I tried to imagine what brought those two billy goats to the safe space where they are now. The likely trip to the slaughter house – two little goats packed in with other animals on some kind of transport that must have felt foreign and probably frightening to them. The crowding, the bleating of the other animals. The sounds and smells as they neared the slaughter house. The escape. The a patch of grass they found by the subway tracks, probably dirty and not too tasty. Then the approach of humans, the fear bubbling into skittishness, the sting of the tranquilizing dart. Then another journey in another mysterious conveyance. The fear and wonder about what was next. Then human caring hands, good food –and, ultimately, a new home, a rescue farm where they will be cared for for the rest of their days. Their new sanctuary.

I imagine, with time, those two little goats will adjust to their new lives. Maybe they will learn to trust people – some of them, at least. They will live out their days in little goat bliss, never even guessing all the forces that led them to where they are. They are home now, safe and secure to mature into their finest goat selves.

Our church always celebrates Homecoming Sunday on the Sunday after Labor Day. That's the tradition in most UU churches. Now, I know a lot of us have been here all along. And others are just finishing up our summers here and getting ready to head for warmer climes. And yet others are returning today after spending the summer gaining their spiritual insights elsewhere. In a congregation that has winter people, summer people, vacationing people, and every other kind of people, we could celebrate homecoming any number of times during the year. But Homecoming Sunday is today. Welcome home, even if you never left and even if you are on your way someplace else. Whatever else may be demanding your attention, I hope for these moments, you can settle into a feeling of “welcome” and “home.” A feeling of being held in this safe sanctuary. Welcome home. May your homecoming here be as transformative as the homecoming those two little goats experienced at the Farm Sanctuary in Watkins Glen, NY.

I don't know about you, but I have felt like those goats at times. Times in my life when I felt some other force was taking me somewhere, I wasn't sure where, but I was frightened. Times when I've narrowly avoided some bad outcome. Times when I've been unconscious. So far, no one has ever had to shoot me with a tranquilizing dart, but there have been times when I have wished someone would. There have been times when I've been lost. Times when I've been found. *I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see.*

This church year, our religious education for kids will be organized around monthly themes. Each month, I hope to use at least one Sunday service to explore the same monthly theme the kids are working on. This month, our kids will be learning about *vision*: a perfect theme for contemplating the church year ahead. Homecoming Sunday seems the perfect opportunity to review why we do what we do, to refresh our vision. What do we envision together?

*I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see.* Actually, there is a difference between vision and sight. Sight, seeing, takes in what is, anchoring the “see-er” to his or her brand of reality. The little boy in our story (*That is My Dream*, Langston Hughes and Daniel Miyares) sees the segregation in the world around him. Monet's doctor sees crisp edges, separating streetlights from

darkness. Monet sees no edges. The train operator saw goats on the tracks. Sometimes sight is even a metaphor for understanding: “I see.” “I understand.” “I get it.” are all synonymous.

But vision goes beyond sight or even understanding, advancing into the territory of dreaming, aspiring, imagining what could be. The little boy in our story *envisions* a different world – one that is fair and free and open-hearted. Monet *envisions* heaven pulling earth into its arms and the heart expanding to claim this world, blue vapor without end. A world of connection, where nothing is separate from the whole. Jon Stewart and his wife *envisioned* a completely different outcome for the little goats.

This past week, President Obama received the Paul Douglas Award for ethics at the University of Illinois. When he accepted the award, he gave a speech full of vision, the kind of vision meant to inspire people to act. Specifically, he urged the students in the audience to vote. His vision was a midterm election in which 5 out of 5 young people vote, instead of the traditional, paltry fewer than 1 out of 5 young voters venturing to the polls during midterm elections. His vision, too, is for the kind of nation he imagines we could create:

*“To all the young people who are here today, there are now more eligible voters in your generation than in any other, which means your generation now has more power than anybody to change things. If you want it, you can make sure America gets out of its current funk. If you actually care about it, you have the power to make sure we seize a brighter future. But to exercise that clout, to exercise that power, you have to show up.*

He ends his speech, saying:

*Thirty minutes. Thirty minutes of your time. Is democracy worth that? We have been through much darker times than these, and somehow each generation of Americans carried us through to the other side. Not by sitting around and waiting for something to happen, not by leaving it to others to do something, but by leading that movement for change themselves. And if you do that, if you get involved, and you get engaged, and you knock on some doors, and you talk with your friends, and you argue with your family members, and you change some minds, and you vote, something powerful happens. Change happens. Hope happens.*

*Not perfection. Not every bit of cruelty and sadness and poverty and disease suddenly stricken from the earth. There will still be problems. But with each new candidate that surprises you with a victory that you supported, a spark of hope happens. With each new law that helps a kid read or helps a homeless family find shelter or helps a veteran get the support he or she has earned, each time that happens, hope happens. With each new step we take in the direction of fairness and justice and equality and opportunity, hope spreads.*

*And that can be the legacy of your generation. You can be the generation that at a critical moment stood up and reminded us just how precious this experiment in democracy really is, just how powerful it can be when we fight for it, when we believe in it. I believe in you. I believe you will help lead us in the right direction. And I will be right there with you every step of the way.*

President Obama's speech (and I encourage you to read the whole speech) describes the current state of America as he sees it – that's sight. But he imagines a nation transformed by the power of the citizenry uniting to do good. That's vision.

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People join churches for all kinds of reasons. Some join so their kids can get a religious education. Some join because they love singing in choirs. Some join because they want to link hands with others who are doing the work of justice and peace. Some join to make friends or to orient themselves in a new community. Some join because they feel as though their lives are falling apart, and they want one place, *just one place*, that will take them in with all their brokenness. Some join because they are profoundly lonely. Some join because they have what the popular vernacular calls a “God-shaped hole” in their hearts. They want to fill it with God or spirit instead of all the junk they've been filling it with to stuff down the pain: food, alcohol, drugs, material possessions, and more. Each of us comes with different needs and desires, and, together, we make up the church, the gathered community.

I believe in the power of that community to heal ... individual souls and the world around us, too. I believe in the power of *our* church, right here in Brunswick, Maine, to open hearts and souls and to help us grow into our best selves. I believe churches do their work most successfully when they have a strong vision of the world they seek to create. And so on this homecoming Sunday, I offer you my vision. I don't see my vision as prescriptive ... more I see it as the start of a conversation: What is the church we want to be? What is the world we want to build?

I envision a church that is a metaphorical sanctuary for all those goats on the tracks who need a safe home. Every single one of us needs a safe home, and I hope this sanctuary, and the sanctuary of this gathered people, can be a safe home for you who are here and for those who have yet to come through our doors.

I envision a church guided by both compassion and ethics, and a desire to create a world with more mercy, justice, and peace in it.

A church that works to discern truth and then is unafraid to speak it.

A church that looks beyond itself, guided in its work by the realities faced by people who are most downtrodden and oppressed, who live at the margins of power.

A church where the generations gather, side by side, enjoying one another, learning from each other, and growing in understanding.

A church where the people can gather support, solace, comfort, and inspiration for their sojourn through all life brings – the sorrows, the joys, the confusions, the angers, the regrets, the worries, and more.

A church of ever opening hearts and minds, where love guides us, forgiveness for mistakes is ample,

and creativity flourishes.

A church that does not forsake the world, does not flee its problems, does not bend low in despair, but applies courage, hope, curiosity, and wisdom to the world's unfolding.

That's what I envision. That's what I believe we can be.

Those goats on the tracks? Well, here's what I think: If it's true what they say, that those goats were destined for the slaughterhouse, their whole world turned around with one bold break for freedom, one instant when they leapt into the unknown. They had their little noses and hearts and souls pointed toward life, and they followed where that took them.

If we point our noses in the direction of the world we envision, we can't go too far wrong. We will have our challenges. We will have as well our lucky breaks and our successes. Even if we cannot truly see the way forward (and who ever can truly see the way forward?) we can leap into the unknown, knowing that we are guided by heart and soul.

So may it be for us, goats on the tracks in our own particular, individual ways, but a gathered people who seek to open our hearts and build a better world. We cannot know where we will end up when we leap, but I welcome this new church year knowing I am making the leap with you and trusting that we will land where we most need to be. Welcome Home.

**Benediction from our Universalist forebear, John Murray:**

Go out into the highways and by-ways.  
Give the people something of your new vision.  
You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine,  
use it in order to bring more light and understanding  
to the hearts and minds of men and women.  
Give them not hell, but hope and courage;  
preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.