Adventure of a Lifetime: A Spiritual Journey

By Kent Hemmen Saleska
Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka
First Sunday as Settled Minister
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Introduction

During the ministerial search process, I had many intense conversations with the Search Committee of this congregation. We also read loads of material about each other, they listened to me preach, and we shared our histories and visions for the future. I've gotten to the point where I have an advantage over you: I know more about you than you know about me! So, for my first sermon as your seventh settled minister, I thought it would be good to begin my ministry by telling you a little more about myself.

When my father began his Unitarian Universalist ministry in the fall of 1980, he titled his first sermon, "What is a Nice Baptist Boy Like Me Doing in a Place Like This?" When my mother began her Unitarian Universalist ministry in the fall of 1988, her first sermon was titled "Indiana Farm Girl Becomes UU Minister." Growing up Unitarian Universalist, and as the son of two Unitarian Universalist ministers, I did not come to this tradition on my own from another tradition. So for my first sermon as a settled Unitarian Universalist minister, I intend to follow my parents' lead and share with you some of my personal story. But it is important that I share with you my own path, a path that has taken me through UUism from the inside. So for my first Sunday as a settled Unitarian Universalist minister, I titled my sermon, "The Adventure of a Lifetime: A Spiritual Journey."

First Movement – Into the Woods

Introductory reading from "Walden," by Henry David Thoreau

> "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion."

I am drawn to the sensuousness of life, the feel of life, the sound, the vision, the touch, and the smell of it. Early on in my life, like Thoreau, I wanted to immerse myself in every genuine mean and sublime lived experience.

Arising out of this desire, from as far back as I can remember, I have lived as an adventurer. I always had a desire to venture into the woods, into unknown places, to learn how

do things by myself, to make my own mistakes, my own discoveries. It seemed that people, especially my mother, loved to tell me the "right" way to do things. But that never set well with me. At some point early on I must have made a discovery that was wrong for others but somehow right for me, and from then on I wanted to learn my own answers for myself.

For example, while I lived in Davenport, Iowa, in my twenties, I spent my summers in Idaho, working as a trail leader with foster kids on a wilderness work program. On each drive out and back, I would inevitably encounter a sign that read "Road Closed Ahead," but I would simply drive past the sign, wanting to see for myself if the road really was closed. Many times the sign would simply be a euphemism for "Road under construction," and I could pass right through the area on gravel. But on occasion, ignoring a "Road Closed" sign would get me into trouble. More than once, and often it seemed to be in the middle of the night, I would encounter a dead end and have to retrace my steps for miles.

For me, it began back in March 1966 when I was born in Ontario, a country town of 400 people nestled in the glacier-carved hills of western Wisconsin. My father was the Reverend Charles Donald Saleska, minister of Community Baptist Church. My mother was Charlotte Justice Saleska, who at the time taught English grammar and literature to the seventh and eighth graders at the nearby consolidated Junior High School.

I grew up hearing many stories about the brave deeds of my father in that small town. He spoke out against the war in Vietnam and in support of a radical non-violent preacher by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. My father took his vocation seriously. He regularly visited the town tavern, not to drink liquor, but to mingle with the alcoholics, bar maids, and pool hall regulars. Many parishioners and townspeople raised their eyebrows about the young Baptist minister entering unholy places, but my father believed in the teachings and examples of Jesus. So in his own ministry, my father went to the places where he felt that a sense of grace and the Holy Spirit were needed most.

When I was born, my father was in the midst of a faith crisis. He loved the work of ministry, but had gotten to the point in his faith journey where he was no longer sure he believed in God. By the time I was three years old, my father had resigned from his church, our family had moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to be near extended family, and my father began doing social work.

By the time I was ten, my parents had discovered Unitarian Universalism. We attended several General Assemblies in the late 1970s and I took some of the UU Junior High classes, including what was then called "About Your Sexuality," though it has since been revised and renamed "Our Whole Lives."

My father re-entered the ministry through Unitarian Universalism, and when I was 14 he was called as the settled minister of the UU Fellowship in Gainesville, Florida. Since all our family and friends remained in the Midwest, that move to Florida was painful. Making new friends was hard, but I did get involved in track and cross-country, and rode my bicycle everywhere, and I loved that freedom.

I also became deeply involved in the Unitarian Universalist youth movement. In the early 1980s the youth movement was known as Liberal Religious Youth (LRY) and was going through many difficulties. I was elected by the Florida District to be a youth delegate to Common Ground, the two-year program developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association to restructure, revise and revitalize the youth movement. Out of those intense program years emerged what we know today as Young Religious Unitarian Universalists – or YRUU.

My involvement in YRUU saved my life in many ways, propelled me into a lifetime of UU involvement, and was a component in what eventually inspired me to enter ministry. My deepest involvement in YRUU came at a fortunate time because that, during my 11th grade year, was when my father was diagnosed with *sclerosing colongitis*, a disease affecting the liver and colon. The disease is rare and terminal, and at 47 years old, my father was given five to ten years to live.

I was no stranger to death. By the time I was in 11th grade, all four of my grandparents had died. But this diagnosis of my own father was devastating. I felt powerless, alone, and battered by forces outside my control. I already struggled with school, so my dad's diagnosis made everything else feel pointless. I just could not find relevance in a math test when my father's life hung in the balance.

My grades got so bad by the time I was a senior in high school that I was not accepted at any college to which I applied. So, with a little bit of guilt, but a lot of happiness about leaving that house, after I graduated from high school I took a bicycle trip across the United States. I drove out to Seattle with a friend and then we rode our bikes through 13 states back home to Gainesville, Florida. That trip was absolutely sublime. I discovered a freedom to make my own decisions, felt the sheer joy of screaming down a mountainside at 50 miles an hour on a bicycle, and I learned a huge amount of self-reliance. With my new sense of worldliness, I was confident I soon would leave home permanently.

Second Movement – Before the Fall

Introductory reading from Parker Palmer on NPR's "Speaking of Faith"

> "Going into my experience of depression, I thought of the spiritual life as climbing a mountain until you got to this high, elevated point where you could touch the hand of God or see a vision of wholeness and beauty. The spiritual life, as far as I was concerned, had nothing to do with going into the valley of the shadow of death. Even though that phrase is right there at the heart of my own spiritual tradition, that wasn't what it was about for me. So on one level I thought, "This is the least spiritual thing I've ever done." The soul is absent, God is absent, faith is absent. All of the faculties I depended on before I went into depression were now utterly useless.
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> "And yet, as I worked my way through that darkness, I sometimes became aware that way back there in the woods somewhere was this sort of primitive piece of animal life. I mean, just some kind of existential reality, some kind of core of being, of my own being, I don't know, maybe of the life force generally, and [it] was somehow holding out the hope of life to me. So I now see the soul as that wild creature way back there in the woods that knows how to survive in very hard places, knows how to survive in places where the intellect doesn't, where the feelings don't, and where the will cannot."

Through friends of our family I eventually learned about the College of Idaho in Caldwell, and that is where I spent most of my college years. Though I felt a great joy at being out of Florida and out of the house where I had experienced so much sorrow and pain, I also continued to struggle with the fragility and meaning of life, and to find my purpose in the middle

of it. During the summer after my freshman year, my ache to find meaning in life was only made more raw when my cousin and best friend – who was the same age as me – committed suicide. I never seriously considered suicide myself – deep down I just loved life too much – but I was also torn apart by how and whether to connect with people. I am an extrovert and get jazzed up by being around people. I love connecting, sharing stories, going to parties, almost anything social. But the painful events in my life just made me want to withdraw. It was too painful to connect too deeply, and for many years I continued to live with a torn soul. On one hand I was born to be social, but on the other I also learned not to trust in relationships.

In college I was in choir and theater, and had several girlfriends, none of whom lasted with me very long. I spent my Junior Year on an exchange program with Hunter College in New York, studying theater for 12 months. Eventually I graduated from the College of Idaho in 1990 with a degree in English literature. Then I promptly went to work for the summer on a friend's farm, and later that fall I worked on a fishing boat in Alaska's Bering Sea.

By this time, because of my dad's illness, my mom had gone to seminary and became a Unitarian Universalist minister herself, and had been called to the UU church in Davenport, Iowa. When I returned from my stint in Alaska, with no other job prospects and my dad extremely ill, I moved back "home" to a place I had never lived to be with my dad during his final days.

My dad died on February 6, 1991, just over eight years since he was first diagnosed. His death was devastating. Shortly before he died I told him, "I'm going to miss you," and he responded, "I'm going to miss you, too." Even now, more than 16 years after his death, his absence feels like what I imagine it feels like to have an amputated limb. This spring I still had joyful urge call him on the phone to tell him about being called to the UU church in Minnetonka.

The years immediately after my father's death were probably some of the most difficult of my life. I could not find a job, I was living back home with my mom while each of us journeyed through our unique pain, and I had no prospects for getting out of a largely blue-collar town that I felt had nothing to offer an energetic and adventurous young adult.

After attending my mom's church for about a year, I noticed a fair number of teenagers running around but no youth group. I had no plan in my head except that I knew how life affirming it had been to be part of YRUU as a teenager. So I went to the Religious Education committee to asked if I could start a youth group and be the advisor. I received an overwhelming positive response. Finally, even though I was not paid, I felt I was contributing something useful to the world.

Since the church had no youth room, I began weekly meetings at our house with three kids. I attended training retreats and got our teens connected to the Prairie Star District and District youth conferences. During the summers, I began working with foster kids in the wilderness areas of Idaho on backcountry work camps. As a volunteer in Davenport for four years, I had built the youth program to over 35 teenagers, trained five or six adults to be youth advisors after I left, got the church to create a youth room, and – with an impending addition – plans were in the works to create a huge new youth room with a bathroom and shower stall down the hall in order to host district youth conferences on their own!

Finally, in the summer of 1995, I got my big break to get out of Davenport: I was hired for 30 hours per week to be the Youth Director for a program with 120 teenagers at First Universalist Church in Minneapolis! I felt I had finally made the big time.

I was incredibly excited to move to Minneapolis, and felt a deep confidence that I would soon build the program at First Universalist to the point where I would be a full-time 40-hour-per week Youth Worker. We had five different Sunday morning programs for 7th through 12th grade, we had two movie overnights each month, a tutoring program for Somali immigrants, a year-long Coming of Age program with 25 ninth graders and three weekend retreats, four other District conferences, and a weeklong trip to Boston each summer. Among other things.

My supervisor had only six months experience with Unitarian Universalism and with the youth before I came on the scene, so she and I did not always see things on the same level. In fact, I felt she was micromanaging me, and not letting me do the work I was hired to do. I had more experience and background in youth work than she did, and I felt I had better ideas on youth programming and empowerment than she did. And I told her so on more than one occasion.

Well, one fine spring weekend after I had been the Youth Director for two years, we had a movie overnight. Normally the junior high kids did not attend the overnights, but each spring we had one with the junior high to introduce them to the senior high program. Many things occurred that night, but the one thing I did not learn about until the next morning was that four junior high kids had brought and drank alcohol to the sleepover.

I was angry, but also not too concerned. My understanding of youth work is that it is the role of teenagers to push boundaries, and it is the role of adults and youth leaders to set boundaries and consequences. The senior high youth had laid out the rules at the beginning of the evening and the junior high youth had broken the rules. This meant that they would receive consequences decided on by the Youth Adult Committee and myself.

The next week, however, I was called into a meeting with my supervisor and the executive committee of the Board, and I was placed on a leave of absence for supposedly allowing the alcohol into the sleepover. A question from the Executive Committee of the Board asked of me at the time (and one that remains the most bizarre question I have ever been asked about youth work) was "as the Youth Director, how could you have let this happen?" It was such a strange question that at first I did not understand what was being asked. As I see it, youth will do what youth will do. Our task as adults is to have boundaries in place at the beginning, and appropriate consequences in place at the end.

This was not how my supervisor and the executive committee of the Board saw things. A week later I was fired.

Third Movement – A Discovery of Balance

Introductory song: "Fall," *by Peter Mayer*
Sung by Kent Hemmen Saleska on guitar

What if the highest destination of any given human life
Was not a place that you could reach if you had to climb?
Wasn't up above like heaven, so no need to fly at all
What if to reach the highest place you had to fall?

Fall, like a drunkard on your face
Like a parachuter jumping from a plane
Fall, like an astronaut from space
Or an acrobat from making a mistake

And what if all the sages, talking about realms out of reach
Would memorize the pages of gravity
What if getting to the highest place is like learning what you know
Or like going to where you are now, like coming home

Fall, like Adam falling down
From the strange, unearthly angels whence he came
Fall, finding a way of trusting in the ground
As if the highest and the lowest places are the same

What if the highest destination
Wasn't up above at all
What if, to reach the highest place
You had to fall

Betrayal. That was my overwhelming feeling after being fired. Betrayal. I felt betrayed by my supervisor, the leadership, and the church as a whole. But the sense of betrayal was not just limited to that. I felt betrayed by my Unitarian Universalist faith. We were supposed to be people who believed in the inherent worth and dignity of each person, and people who believed in the Democratic process. With all that, how could what happened to me have happened? Me! Me, who had grown up Unitarian Universalist! Me, who had two UU minister parents! Me, who had been so deeply involved in YRUU that it had inspired me to a lifetime of youth work! Me, who by then had seven years' experience working with teenagers! Didn't they get what a valuable asset they were kicking out?

Being fired as the Youth Director at First Universalist was the biggest faith crisis in my life. I know it takes a lot for a Unitarian Universalist to have a crisis of faith…but that was it for me. For almost the entire first year I just simply reeled in shock from what had happened. And for the first time in my life I felt like I never wanted to step foot in a Unitarian Universalist church again. All UUs were hypocrites and liars, proof once again that I couldn't trust the

relationships I had built with people. No matter what I did, it always seemed to come to the same devastating and bitter end every time.

Healing came, but slowly. First came a brief joyful revenge when my supervisor was fired six months later. But after she was gone, I realized that's not really what I wanted either. I just wanted my job back, the job I loved so much.

The most significant step in my healing didn't come until years later. As I ruminated almost daily over how and why I was fired, and as I worked in other youth programs with other supervisors, and after talking with many, many friends and supporters, I began to entertain thoughts about my own behavior. I began to think about how I tended to ignore the signs that said "Road Closed Ahead."

I began to see how, even though I have a fine UU pedigree, valid experience, and the process of my firing was flawed, I still had a supervisor and still had a structure within which I needed to work. When I was a Youth Director, I did not realize how my behavior was contributing toward driving me over a cliff. Over time, raising my voice, arguing with and not doing things a supervisor asks or requires are all forms of writing on the wall that warn of an employee's immanent departure! I had chosen to ignore the writing on the wall *and* continue in the naïve belief that I was immune from consequences. To survive intact, I had to choose between the two. But I did not choose either one.

As I look back at the dynamics of getting fired from First Universalist, the one particular piece I have come to take ownership of and admit as mine was the Sin of Pride. It took me five years to come to that simple statement. But to read, comprehend, and respond to the writing on the wall was one of the greatest practical and spiritual revelations of my life. It makes sense, since it came out of the most painful faith crisis of my life. The part of it that is so difficult, however, the part that is one of the hardest lessons I've had to learn in my life and why I've come to see it as a spiritual practice, is this: that when I feel hurt by a situation, and feel innocent and self-righteous, that I also need to find the grace and compassion to admit my part in what contributed to the problem or pain.

Of course, there is much more to the story of my life, some of which I had to leave out because of time constraints, some because of the boundaries I prefer and need to make around my personal and family life. But there is more to tell, including how, when I entered seminary full-time in the fall of 2001, I had my first class on the night of September 11 and also met in that class a beautiful, energetic, and engaging woman by the name of Heidi Hemmen! With her I transitioned from a life of physical adventure to one more spiritual and emotional in nature. Heidi had enrolled in seminary because she was wondering what to do with her life, and her father – a hospital chaplain supervisor – suggested seminary. Heidi had never heard of Unitarian Universalism, so each week after class when we went out for drinks with other students, she would grill me on UU history and faith. She helped me to think and articulate my thoughts better, which provided very stimulating conversation. Three years later we were married!

I've shared with you some of the most meaningful parts of my life because over time I've come to believe even more in the power of relationship. Relationships – whether between atoms, people, or galaxies – are a primary force of the universe. Being in relationship with one another is not a choice; it is a process of awareness. It is an awareness of a connection to forces larger than our selves, and a process of discovering our power and our limitations. Being in relationship, as I have found with Heidi, helps create balance.

I discover balance when I recognize my part in conflict. Admitting my part in conflict sometimes verges on feelings of embarrassment and shame…but then I realize that I feel less

like a helpless victim and more like an active participant in my own growth and spiritual development. Equally important, if I can discover and name my part in conflict, then I won't be offended or caught off balance when someone else names it to my face. I'm not saying naming my part in conflict is easy; merely that it helps create a happier and more balanced life.

In this manner I believe it is possible to create a stronger and healthier spiritual community. I believe, through our relationships, that one path to creating a healthy spiritual community is by being transparent with each other. Being direct. Speaking our truth with compassion. Being clear with each other about where we're coming from and what our motivations are. Telling our stories. Finding balance – especially after a fall – can be a dazzling experience…as Richard Wilbur describes in his poem, "Digging for China."

Digging for China
By Richard Wilbur, from *The Poems of Richard Wilbur*

"Far enough down is China," somebody said.
"Dig deep enough and you might see the sky
As clear as at the bottom of a well.
Except it would be real--a different sky.
Then you could burrow down until you came
To China! Oh, it's nothing like New Jersey.
There's people, trees, and houses, and all that,
But much, much different. Nothing looks the same."

I went and got the trowel out of the shed
And sweated like a coolie all that morning,
Digging a hole beside the lilac-bush,
Down on my hands and knees. It was a sort
Of praying, I suspect. I watched my hand
Dig deep and darker, and I tried and tried
To dream a place where nothing was the same.
The trowel never did break through to blue.

Before the dream could weary of itself
My eyes were tired of looking into darkness,
My sunbaked head of hanging down a hole.
I stood up in a place I had forgotten,
Blinking and staggering while the earth went round
And showed me silver barns, the fields dozing
In palls of brightness, patens growing and gone
In the tides of leaves, and the whole sky china blue.
Until I got my balance back again
All that I saw was China, China, China.