

A Weaving of Summer Thoughts and Experiences into a Hopefully Timely and Coherent Meditation that Addresses, in Some Way, the Meaning of Life, or at Least, a Life of Meaning

Alternate Title: *High Dives*

Rev. Mark Stringer
First Unitarian Church of Des Moines
August 23, 2009

"welcome to your community :-)"

–Message posted by Linda Keairns on the Facebook wall of Rev. Mark Stringer

Sermon

It's been a while since I've stood here. I've got so much I want to tell you.

I want to tell you about this past June's General Assembly in Salt Lake City. This is the annual convention of Unitarian Universalism, attended by thousands of UUs from all over the country, during which there are lots of workshops, meetings, and worship services. One afternoon, I stood before a plenary session, with a dozen of our church members behind me, and a couple thousand UUs in front of me, and accepted our church's designation as a breakthrough congregation. I'll never forget the joy I felt as I represented you all in that moment. And what a blast to have my face broadcast on the big video screens as I offered greetings from Iowa, new home of marriage equality!

I want to tell you about how excited I am about the election of our new UUA president, Peter Morales. He will be a wonderful leader and spokesperson for us.

I want to tell you about how proud I am of our religious movement for continuing its efforts to become more welcoming to and interactive with a more multi-cultural population. We've obviously got a lot of work to do, but, in my 13 years as a UU, this is the most hopeful I have been.

I want to tell you about Camp StarTrail, our new district summer camp in Nebraska, which I served as chaplain. Being there was one of the best UU experiences I've had and I'm already looking forward to next summer's camp.

I want to tell you about the UUA's new "Standing on the Side of Love" campaign, which is less about broadcasting our identity as a not-

necessarily-*religious*, religious tradition and more about showcasing our values and actions as a compassionate, engaged, justice-seeking people.

I want to tell you about my thoughts on the health care reform debate and the most compelling question at its core, which should be *How can we best care for our fellow citizens with the understanding that health care is a right, not a privilege?*, but which has morphed into the question *How much longer can such ridiculous lies and distortions about things like Death Panels pass as truth?*

I want to offer my perspectives on the Henry Louis Gates Jr. controversy (intrigued by it) and the beer summit (amused by it). And of course, I want to tell you about all the same-sex weddings I've been officiating, which I'm pleased to say show no signs of tapering off. In fact, next Saturday, nine same-gender couples from the Unity-Unitarian congregation in St. Paul, MN, will arrive at our church in a motor coach they are calling "The Love Bus" for nine legally recognized weddings performed by their ministers and me that afternoon.

I could easily be tempted to tell you more about all of that stuff, but I won't. Not this week anyway.

Instead I want to focus our time together on two things. Two things that have provided for me the most complex metaphors and thoughts of the summer. Two things both related to leaps of faith.

First. A swimming lesson moment.

My daughter Leah had her first two rounds of swimming lessons this summer. I have many mental pictures of how much she learned from week to week, how she acclimated to the water and grew her own confidence of what is possible through the investment of a little bit of courage and a lot of time in the water. But the most striking swimming lesson image I take with me from this summer is not of my lovely daughter, but rather one of her fellow swimmers.

The last day of each two-week round of lessons, the students get to show off what they have learned for their proud, camera-toting parents, and then they are invited to jump off a diving board at the deep end of the pool. As most of them can't actually swim yet, the little ones wear life-vests and are greeted in the water by a friendly lifeguard who insures their safe exit from the pool. Very controlled,

mostly tame risk-taking for the majority of these children ensues, and a good time is clearly had by all.

But on this diving board day, something unusual happened, something that captured my heart and imagination. One of Leah's peers, who, I had earlier observed as at the top of their class in swimming ability, decided she would give the high board a try. No one expected this tiny sprite of a girl to jump from a board at least 10 feet in the air rather than 3, but no one suggested that she shouldn't either. In fact, as she slowly climbed the ladder to take her bird's-eye view of the waiting families and lifeguards below, she was attracting the expectant focus of everyone who had noticed her ascent. I think all of us at ground level were holding our collective breath as she took some hesitant steps towards the edge of the board and the prospect of a great leap ahead. No one seemed to want to offer vocal encouragement, knowing from our life experiences that adult interaction might actually get in the way. This was her choice and we all knew it. Just as we all knew, it was a long way down to the pool from where she stood.

The lifeguard in the water below held open her arms and offered a toothy smile, but by then the decision had already been made: No. Not this time.

Our young adventurer carefully turned around and slowly made her way back down the ladder. I'll admit to being disappointed, but I knew, if I had been her, I probably would have chosen to retreat, too.

That could have been the end of the drama, but it wasn't. A short time later, our courageous young girl again began the careful ascent to the high board. She must have consulted with some inner resource and decided this was the time to attempt the big plunge after all.

So, again, as all eyes were glued on her, I projected how important this moment had become, how important that she try, that she have the experience of jumping into the unknown, that she embrace this opportunity to take a risk, so that afterwards, she could revel in the triumph of her courage over her fear. I found myself chanting under my breath, "You can do it...you can do it..." I caught the eyes of her mother, who also seemed to be anxious about it all.

But even in the suspense of the moment, I acknowledged that my interest in seeing this little girl jump was only a little bit about her. It was mostly about me.

I wanted to see her jump because I thought it might teach me something. Maybe I needed to see her not hold back as a way to encourage me to not hold back. Maybe I needed her to take the leap because, well, it is difficult to jump into the unknown, and we've all been there, haven't we? Standing on the edge of a big decision or a difficult circumstance, wondering whether or not we can make it, whether or not we can risk it, whether or not we can survive it? The jump is somewhat different for each of us and is always changing with the seasons and circumstances of our lives. But a jump of one kind or another—a leap of faith we might say—is almost always there, calling to us, and how we respond almost always matters, and usually more than we can know at the time.

So, standing there on the deck of the pool, my eyes and my heart attentive to this five-year-old's choice, I was looking for some guidance, for some hope, for something.

There she stood on the edge of the board looking down, sizing up the situation, thinking, maybe even praying in her five-year-old way. There was nothing cutesy about this moment. She wasn't playing out a drama between herself and an over-attentive parent or a sibling dare. It was just her, and her choice.

I'll tell you the outcome later, but first I want to tell you about another decision to leap or not to leap, this one about Facebook.

At least some of you know from my sermons that I have had a Facebook account since last December, when some college friends encouraged me to join. Facebook is an Internet social networking site that enables participants to post information, photographs, links and messages on an Internet page called a "Wall". It's kind of like an electronic bulletin board to which only your confirmed friends have access. To become a "friend", participants have to initiate contact by inviting others to "add" them to their "friend" list. There's something very juvenile about it all, or so it seems at first. From afar, it reminded me of these things we called "Slam books" in the sixth grade. Someone would turn a spiral notebook into a traveling survey document in which each page sought an answer to a question aimed at determining, in the sixth-grade hierarchy of important things, how cool you were, whether you were friend-worthy or not. One page might ask, "What is your favorite kind of jeans?" At that time, in my school anyway, the only respectable answer was Levis, whether you actually wore them or not. I quietly admired the kid or two who had an off-

the-beaten-path response, like “Sears Toughskins”, but I also wondered whether they were courageous, or just naïve about sixth-grade politics. Why risk standing out that way?

But immediately upon joining Facebook, I saw that it was not a means by which people were left out. Quite the opposite, in fact. Within hours of joining, I was connecting and re-connecting with people I hadn't touched base with in years and doing so was far more energizing than awkward. I had to acknowledge how juvenile I had been to lose contact with all these pieces of my life, assuming they were still who they were when we last communicated, instead of growing, changing (and aging!) people, just like me. I wasn't just friend-ing the obvious folks. I was friend-ing former girlfriends and former rivals. I was friend-ing people from the nooks and crannies of my past lives as a student, as a teacher, as an actor. I was even friend-ing people (especially from high school) who I couldn't even remember. It's a curious thing to have people invite you to friendship who you simply can't recall. At first, I waited on confirming their requests believing that it was disrespectful to confirm friends I wasn't sure I knew, but I quickly learned to lighten up. Why turn down an offering of friendship?

This is not to say there aren't difficult choices to be made, particularly in the past loves category. But Facebook does give you an out. You can always “de-friend” someone, if necessary, though, thankfully, I haven't felt a need to do that yet!

After the first few heady weeks of my Facebook beginnings, I was telling a minister colleague about it. She said, “Are you going to let church members on your page?” I said, “I don't know. I was thinking of being *laissez-faire* about it. No one has asked yet, so...” Then she interrupted with some words of wisdom. “I'd give it some thought if I were you,” she said. Now that a flag of caution had been raised, I realized that I needed to be careful here. Over the next few weeks I watched as some of my colleagues with church members on their pages had received messages on their walls that included snarky critiques of the past week's sermon, or broadcasts of sensitive pastoral care information, or questions about the minister's motives for a particular posting. It all could get very weird, very quickly, it seemed. So, for several months, when a church member asked to be my friend, as some of you did, I wrote back some quick message about not accepting church members as friends, which felt, well, not quite right, you know?

After several months of this, though, I started to wonder if my caution was making me miss out on the possibility of something greater than safety. The fact is, there are at least one hundred of you currently on Facebook, and, as your minister, I had to ask myself how I could dare to miss the opportunity to be a witness to what is important to you and to your lives, and, in turn, to share what is important in mine.

So just a few weeks ago, I created a new Facebook identity for the Rev. Mark Stringer [<http://www.facebook.com/revmark.stringer>], and spent several hours searching for you. The practice was a spiritual revelation. You see, the longer I have been on Facebook, the more theology I have found there. Inviting someone to friendship has theological ramifications, just as choosing to ignore or confirm that invitation. Who is worthy of being left out of the circle of community and who gets allowed in without a second thought? What is, or can be, the beloved community? Is it for everyone, or not? Our Unitarian Universalist approach to religion affirms that everyone is worthy, everyone is ultimately loved, everyone is connected to everyone else, whether we fully understand or comprehend those connections or not. Facebook, for all its quirks and annoyances, can be a vehicle for this kind of affirmation, for acceptance, for belonging, for radical hospitality. It can be a vehicle by which we open ourselves to the diverse experiences of our past and present, even as we pursue our future. It is a tool by which we can say "Yes" to our lives and to the lives of those around us. In fact, one of my favorite features of Facebook is the option it gives the user, after someone has posted a message or a photo, to click a link that says "Like", which, once clicked, broadcasts for everyone that you "like this" posting. Public affirmation and acceptance with the click of a mouse. Are there any Facebook users out there who don't feel valued when someone invites or confirms your friendship or "likes" what you have posted?

This is simple, powerful stuff. Communicating on Facebook emerged for me not as a diversion from life, but as another way to spiritually engage with life. Not the only way, of course, nor even the most important way, but one worthy of attention and care, nonetheless.

As the confirmations from my new church "friends" began to pour in, filling my in-box with affirmation, I was emboldened in ways I didn't expect. Receiving the affirmation and acceptance of others will do that, you know. It gives us courage to accept ourselves for who we are, and to reach out in similar ways to others, accepting them in the fullness of their humanity.

One of the first church responders to my request for friendship was member Linda Keairns, who posted on my wall, "Welcome to your community."

And this was perhaps the most theological statement of all.

Yes, it is my community. Just as it is yours. And my community is complex and not always pleasant and sometimes overwhelmed by trivia. But it is also a community that is more-often-than-not affirming and inspiring and rich with possibility. It is a community populated by an always growing roster of folks on unique life journeys which sometimes will merge and sometimes will part but which, always will lead, one way or another, toward a someday when we will no longer have the precious chance to connect and re-connect, to learn, and to love.

This is our community, an ever-expanding opportunity to engage with the abundance of our lives, and to boldly seek more abundance, even when it feels risky to do so, even when the easiest thing would be to stay hidden. Even when to dive in may be the last thing we think we want to do.

Once my RevMark page started to grow, I decided that having two identities was not my aspiration at all. I wanted my different lives to blend and to have one Facebook locale for my life. I wanted to more boldly claim my identity as a Unitarian Universalist minister with my friends who knew me when ministry was probably the last thing they would have expected. So I've invited my other friends to come on over to my RevMark page, setting off another opportunity for me to affirm them, and them to affirm me. I've taken the plunge, and the water feels great.

My leap has worked out well.

So, what happened with our brave little girl on the diving board?

Now there are at least three ways her story can end.

One: she jumps, everyone cheers, and she easily makes her way back to the pool edge, where she is greeted as the heroine she is.

Two: she jumps, awkwardly smacks the water, cries out in pain, is showered with the embarrassing attention of well-meaning onlookers and develops a deep phobia about risk-taking that sets her on a path

of low self-esteem and self-loathing that can only culminate in a life of disappointment and despair. Or so we might imagine. It's worth noting how often we focus on this kind of possible result when we are faced with a big leap, and how rarely our leap, once taken, turns out this way.

Three: She chooses to turn around and retreat once again, disappointing those who were quietly rooting for her, and, perhaps, for themselves.

Maybe it would have made an easier sermon had she jumped, but the truth is, she didn't. She walked away.

So instead of an easy sermon this morning, we are left with the more complicated one.

Yes, she walked away leaving her hopeful fans, particularly this guy [me] who had allowed himself to be so entranced by her moment of decision that he actually thought it was somehow about him, to face the fact that sometimes the sensible choice is to not jump at all. Sometimes the sensible, if not the only, choice may be to just walk away.

But, I have to wonder, what did she do the next time? Or the time after that?

Each time up the ladder, each vulnerable step toward the edge, is a step leading somewhere we need to go, even if we choose to retreat. The biggest leaps, after all, can take time and courage, false starts and forgiveness, and lots of little steps.

Sooner or later, we know that she will jump. She's too close not to. Sooner or later, she will trust and she will take the leap that's waiting for her.

And so will we. One way or another, so will we.