



A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Ministerial Candidate

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THE SUNNY HILL

During my internship in Dallas, my supervisor, Dr. Laurel Hallman, introduced me to the spiritual practice of memorizing and meditating upon poetry. Her ministerial mentor, Dr. Harry Scholefield, had taught her this long before. During Laurel's search process leading to being called to Dallas about 20 years ago, she meditated on the Rilke poem that I read this morning; she recommends it to many of her parishioners as an aid to discernment, so I followed her advice.

Rilke was an intensely spiritual man, but not one who devoted his life to guiding others; rather, he simply mined the depths of his own life, a process which will inevitably find jewels of truth applicable to others. This particular poem was one of many he never included in a specific collection, so we don't know what triggered his need to express this existential moment. All we know is how much it speaks to us about living from the heart and being open to whatever it is that calls us. Let's hear it again.

*My eyes already touch the sunny hill,
going far ahead of the road I have begun.
So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;
it has its inner light, even from a distance —*

*and changes us, even if we do not reach it,
into something else, which hardly sensing it, we already are;
a gesture waves us on, answering our own wave . . .
but all that we feel is the wind in our faces.*

I offer you today one of many possible readings of this poem, just one interpretation. Each of us senses some "sunny hill," a deep hope or longing that we perceive far ahead; we may have only the faintest image of what it might be. We cannot know it before we get much closer, but still it draws us on. The direction we aim in; the desire to move towards it; the journey itself changes us. Even if we do not reach the end, the *aiming*, the *movement* itself feeds our transformation. The inner light from that distant hill acts upon us as sunlight upon a seed.

Some part of us that already exists hidden within, perhaps some potential that we have or some barely conscious dream, starts to form and gather power.

In our depths, we yearn for that light; our yearning flows out of us in waves of energy, and that for which we long subtly responds to our energy, orienting our desire. This image brings to my mind something like spiritual sonar, in which the objects of our dream send back a ping, helping us to know what and where they are.

This journey of the heart and soul, even if for some it includes concrete change and motion, may not be outward at all; it may simply be a passage we take within us. No matter what we see far ahead of us, though, what we encounter most directly is right up against us, resisting us like a headwind. Despite our orientation forward, this wind, these forces affect our path, whether they come from within or whether they are obstacles put in our way. Rilke is describing the journey of a life and the growth of a heart.

I've found another inspiring guide in Parker Palmer, a Quaker who writes on the process of becoming. His approach is always to listen to what's inside, so that someone who, for instance, wants to *become* a teacher or stretch his skills, looks first into his most honest motivations to teach, which will come from both his inner life and the world's need. One of the first quotations I heard in seminary comes from one of Parker's most powerful books, *Let Your Life Speak*: he writes, "Vocation is the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need."

Another counsel that Parker offers is that each individual must guide her life from the perspective of her highest purpose and from what her *life* is calling her to do. *Life* may ask us to do something we've not thought of ourselves, even something we might not want to do. Or, to put it more clearly, something we won't realize we want until we do it. That sounds scary, doesn't it? That life may ask us to do what we don't want to.

For a long time in my life, I resisted truly opening myself to any new vocation because, based on a childhood fantasy of working with Albert Schweitzer in Africa, I feared that as an adult I'd be called to do just that – to be a medical missionary! No matter how rewarding such work might have been, my mind always swarmed with images of bugs, unbearable heat, dripping humidity, inedible food... but what I've found is that there are a lot of steps between first asking life what it truly wants of you, and then somewhere down the road doing just that. And finding deep *gladness* replaces fear with much joy.

If a clairvoyant had told me in 1996 that I was going to preach in West Vancouver someday, I'd have dismissed him as a kook. But, in fact, it was in that year that my life started to tell me it wanted something *more*, something *else*, something *better* – it was the first glimpse of a distant sunny hill. Having no idea what that something better could be, I considered at various times:

finding an office partner,
moving to a new home,

redecorating my current home,
 relocating to a different city,
 getting a dog,
 taking up ballroom dancing,
 renouncing romance entirely,
 and even moving out into the country to become a carpenter.
 Only gradually did my focus narrow in on changing my work.

Having decided that this was in fact a crucial change to make, I considered taking a short sabbatical. Only once I'd come to that point did I realize I had to leave psychiatry altogether; that decision itself, which I have never regretted, took a carefully planned year to complete. Leaving my work served only to clear the brush out so I could get a better view of that distant hill. The point I'm making is that transformation comes in slices, whether thick or thin, gradual or fast; but if it's a necessary transformation, it pulls us along.

And you want to hear the funny thing? After all that, when I told my mother that I was leaving psychiatry, thinking that she would have an anxiety attack at the idea, she said, "Oh, you told us that back when you graduated from medical school! That you'd either stay with psychiatry your whole career, or that you'd change careers after about 20 years!" Including my residency training, I was in the field of psychiatry for 20 years. I'd forgotten all about saying that.

I want to point out that nothing I've said today applies any more to me as a minister than it does to you in your various walks of life with your known or not yet recognized vocation. Is there something fuzzy on the horizon trying to catch your attention? Is there dissatisfaction in your life that it's becoming time to resolve? Is there a dream you've dismissed that is patiently waiting for you to reclaim it? Later today, consider taking just one moment to survey your inner horizon to see if any rays of sun are shining far ahead.

Similarly, what I'm saying applies to you collectively as North Shore Unitarian. As your church has transited this crucial period in its life, it has been essential to look forward to see what is your "sunny hill." What do you envision this church becoming? How long a list of possibilities do you have? What might you have stopped hoping for long ago?

I've been told quite a few such visions this week while so many of you have come to talk with me and each other. Many of you with specific beliefs imagine a church in which you find others here who see the world as you do, but which also fosters a sense of belonging for all members. Both Christians and atheists want this to be a safe and respectful space. The youth of the church desire a close connection with adult members and a recognized position within the congregation, and the children want people to be friendly to them. Likewise, the elderly and the ill want to count on your comfort and assistance. You aim for

this community to attract and be relevant to young adults and people of all generations. One means to all these parts of your vision is to deepen further your welcome and acceptance of the diversity within North Shore and among your visitors. This will require hard, sometimes called 'holy' conversation, in which you continue to be clear about your hopes and needs and listen to each other with increasing understanding.

As you look to your future, you want this to be a more accessible and well-known institution and have a variety of ideas about how this could be achieved. You foresee physical surroundings that are inviting and comfortable and that provide adequate space and technology to support the tasks you undertake. You hope that the community services you provide will themselves attract people to investigate your church further. When you meet someone in your neighborhood, you want to be able to say you're a member of North Shore Unitarian and see a look of recognition and respect in their eyes because this church is known for its work in the community. You're eager to invite your family and friends to attend a Sunday service, anticipating pride and enjoyment in sharing it with them. The means to these ends will be many, but they will be founded on an ever-deepening commitment to provide the church your time, energy and, yes, money.

The most fundamental hope that I heard this week is for this church to inspire each member to grow beyond what you think yourselves to be. You want to be stretched, called forth and surprised by the capacities and depths you find inside. Respect for who you are and where you are in your journey is not enough; you want to be encouraged to grow more magnanimous, compassionate and courageous. You also want to be helped up when you falter and celebrated when you leap forward and land firmly. The means to these ends will require you to build trust amongst you and to share love abundantly.

Perhaps this can all be summed up in your longing for the church to feel like home, perhaps a better home than you've ever had, and one with a big, wide, open front door. You are near to bursting with pent-up enthusiasm that you want channeled, both by deliberating productively together on courses of action that you will take, and by respectful and caring ministerial leadership.

The other vital question facing you is what the world needs North Shore to become. What gesture is waving you on? Now is not the time for *me* to speculate about what this critical period in history needs, indeed, demands of you; if I'm to be your minister, I will take the responsibility to remind you that life calls this congregation to become more than it has been. I have been wonderfully surprised this week to perceive how open you are to asking this question and to listening intently for the responses that will come to you. The process of answering that call is a deep and sacred task that I see you preparing for with thought, with heart and with spirit.

For many years, the only thing I've truly prayed for is knowledge of what my highest purpose is and for the ability to meet it; I think of it as discovering the reason I was born, but more concretely, it's the chance to apply my best talents and greatest vulnerabilities to a purposeful life. Only on occasion does any indication of that purpose come to me as a felt desire.

For some time now, I've desired to be a parish minister, and, if you need me to say it out loud I'll do it like a New Brunswicker: boys oh boys, do I ever wanna be your minister some bad!

Still, it is for you to decide if your desires and purposes match mine, and I will abide by your decision. I will come here only if you are certain enough that it is the right thing for you and for North Shore. I know you will consider it carefully, by looking both into your heart and by reasoning it through.

My greatest longing for this church is that you find your true calling where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need.

May it be so.