

**"A House is a Home"**  
**September 18, 2011**

**Rev. Alison Hyder**  
**First Unitarian Church of Wilmington**

**Reading: from *Native Stranger* by Eddy L. Harris**

When African American author Eddy L. Harris went to Africa, he entered on a voyage of discovery that took him into the heart of the continent and opened his eyes to his own assumptions and values. He started in the North, in Tunisia, and worked his way south. One day, early in his trip, he stopped in at an information booth in Tunis. Harris tells this story:

*The two men behind the information counter greeted me with good cheer and open arms. One of them kissed my cheek. He called me his brother. In an instant we formed a friendship that was not like a friendship at all, but more like dogs meeting and sniffing each other, a friendship so quickly started and so easily ended, so easy and open in its expressions of warmth and happiness. When strangers meet, the contact is small. Our lives are like two lines intersecting at a single point. They do not run parallel. They merely come together. They touch momentarily. They drift apart. At best they reach some common sentiment that binds them, something they can recognize and carry, each in his own direction.*

*I had come to this counter for a little tourist info. What I took away would stay with me throughout the journey, perhaps, and I hoped a lot longer.*

*The wife of one of the men came by to deliver an armload of bread.*

*"For our dinner," the man said, and my stomach growled. The men laughed.*

*"Hungry?" [one asked]. "Would you like a piece of bread?"*

*"No," I said, "I'm fasting."*

*One face lit up, then the other.*

*"You're making the fast? You're not Muslim, are you?"*

*"No," I said. "I do it out of solidarity. When I am in Tunisia, I do as the Tunisians."*

*They shouted with exhilaration. The thin man brought out a chair. The other man introduced me to his wife. His two young children came by, and after some instruction in Arabic from the father, they greeted me as if I were a long-lost cousin. The children shook hands with me. The littlest one patted my knee.*

*The family proceeded to teach their guest about Ramadan, the rigors of fasting, and the stress.*

*"Hunger and heat combine to fatigue men and make them crazy. They argue and fight. They spend their energy quickly and sleep all afternoon."*

*It was a stupid question, but I asked him why, if fasting was so hard, did they do it?*

*"We do it," he said, "for the same reason you do it. We go without so we can better understand those who must go without. Like the zakat, giving to the poor, it is a way of purifying the rest of what we have and eat. It is a voluntary thing. You do what you can afford to do. If you are sick, if you are a mother nursing a baby, if you are old, you do not need to fast."*

*... This was why I had come to Africa, I told him. To find some sort of common bond, some common sentiment, a simple recognition of what pulls us together. To suffer with someone, not merely for suffering's sake ... but to see what other men endure and to endure it with them. To learn what makes them endure. It is the difference perhaps, between travel and tourism. [*Native Stranger*, pp 40 - 43]*

**Meditation: "Patience and Silence" by Charles A. Gaines**

How quiet it is when we have the patience to be silent.

How much we can learn in moments like these.

*We can learn to have patience with ourselves, to better understand and like who we are and what we are.*

We can learn to have patience with others, to better listen to what they say and how they feel.

*We can learn to have patience with life, to better work with it, rather than against it.*

How much do we need silence:

*Silence for truth so that we may learn wisdom,*

*Silence for wisdom so that we may love,*

*Silence for love so that we may be just,*

*Silence for justice so that we may live fully.*

*May we be more patient and more silent, so that we may proceed with courage and compassion.*

**Reading from *The Middle of Everywhere* by Mary Pipher**

One time I sat at the health department with a pregnant Sudanese teenager. She was tall and she wore her hair in dreadlocks. She had on a red polka-dot dress and purple slippers and was a marvelous, but unusual sight. As she and I sat waiting for her appointment, a Vietnamese toddler approached us. The little girl stared at my friend for a very long time.

At first it was cute, then it grew a bit uncomfortable. The toddler was examining my friend as if she were trying to decide if she was human. All of a sudden, the little girl smiled broadly and blew my friend a kiss. We laughed in relief, but the laughter was about something deeper than relief. It was about the ability of us humans to recognize ourselves in another. It was about our ability to see our common humanity and blow each other a kiss of welcome. [pp 348-9]

**Sermon: "A House is a Home" by Rev. Alison Hyder**

This month we honor the birthday of Jane Addams, who was not, precisely, a Unitarian Universalist. Jane Addams was a social reformer and pacifist who won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1931, the same year that she gave the Ware lecture at the Unitarian General Assembly. She was raised a Quaker, joined a Presbyterian Church for a while, and was the interim minister for the Chicago Ethical Culture Society. She often attended All Souls Unitarian Church, but she pointedly decided to join neither group. When it came right down to it, Addams was too inclusive to be identified with any sect.

It's not that Addams had no personal commitments or identity. I think, rather, that she was wary of being pigeon-holed by smaller minds. Jane Addams was a citizen of the world. Her only creed was love.

Jane Addams was born in 1860, just around the time when social concepts were changing. Slaves would soon achieve their freedom and seek ways to claim their citizenship. Immigrants were crowding into American cities

from Italy, Russia, and Germany, trying to make a life. American women were becoming more visible and involved in social affairs. Middle class girls were beginning to receive the educational advantages of their brothers - but not the same opportunities. Plenty of poor women worked at menial and backbreaking jobs in factories, sculleries, and sweatshops. But few careers were considered suitable for genteel women, and marriage generally ended whatever ambitions they possessed.

And so there were generations of educated and idealistic women whose independent nature was frustrated. Addams said,

*I have seen young girls suffer and grow sensibly lowered in vitality in the first years after they leave school. In our attempt then to give a girl pleasure and freedom from care we succeed, for the most part, in making her pitifully miserable. She finds "life" so different from what she expected it to be. She is besotted with innocent little ambitions, and does not understand this apparent waste of herself, this elaborate preparation, if no work is provided for her. There is a heritage of noble obligation which young people accept and long to perpetuate. The desire for action, the wish to right wrong and alleviate suffering haunts them daily. Society smiles at it indulgently instead of making it of value to itself. The wrong to them begins even farther back, when we restrain the first childish desires for "doing good", and tell them that they must wait until they are older and better fitted. We intimate that social obligation begins at a fixed date, forgetting that it begins at birth itself. ... Parents are often inconsistent: they deliberately expose their daughters to knowledge of the distress in the world; they send them to hear missionary addresses on famines in India and China; they accompany them to lectures on the suffering in Siberia; they agitate together over the forgotten region of East London. In addition to this, from babyhood the altruistic tendencies of these daughters are persistently cultivated. They are taught to be self-forgetting and self-sacrificing, to consider the good of the whole before the good of the ego. But when all this information and culture show results, when the daughter comes back from college and begins to recognize her social claim to the [disadvantaged] "submerged tenth", and to evince a disposition to fulfill it, the family claim is strenuously asserted; she is told that she is unjustified, ill-advised in her efforts. If she persists, the family too often are injured and unhappy unless the efforts are called missionary and the religious zeal of the family carry them over their sense of abuse. When this zeal does not exist, the result is perplexing [for] a young head full of generous and unselfish plans. The girl loses something vital out of her life to which she is entitled. She is restricted and unhappy; her elders meanwhile, are unconscious of the situation and we have all the elements of a tragedy. [119-120]*

Addams herself was made of sterner stuff. With her best friend, Ellen Starr, She went into the slum section of Chicago where immigrants were crowded into crude and ramshackle tenements. The two women bought Hull-House, and there they founded the first Settlement House in the United States. Addams realized that the only way to help refugees was to live among them and become a part of their lives. Hull-House became a community center for the neighborhood, reaching across ethnic bounds to offer classes, social outreach, and community to these new Americans. But she did that by affirming their individual cultural identities. She knew that immigrants had to build upon their strengths if they were to survive in this brutal new world. There were polka parties, celebrations, and cooking demonstrations. Hull-House attracted volunteers, idealistic young women and men, who gave citizenship classes and lessons in art and music.

But Hull-House also provided very practical outreach to the poor, serving as a food bank and helping people find resources and jobs. Once they were established and trusted, neighbors would tell them of the sick and indigent, of isolated old people, often bewildered and afraid. This was the earliest phase of social work. There was no safety net back then, no welfare or Medicare, and few people who even cared. Churches demanded allegiance,

and some withdrew their support from Hull-House because it wasn't a Christian organization. There was no religious instruction or attempts at conversion, except a kind of universal fellowship of love. That was the only faith required.

And sometimes that was a challenge. Many immigrants are escaping brutality and oppression. They often distrust authority for very good reasons. At best they've been ignored, and more frequently they've been harassed and exploited. They've seen violence and poverty and suffered all kinds of loss. They are often afraid of doctors and don't understand our cultural norms.

Addams also helped to bridge the generational gaps that build between immigrant parents and their energetic and impatient children, who want to fit into their new culture. Most of these first generation Americans are ashamed of their parents and consider them to be backwards and slow. But their elders are likely to be in shock from all the upheaval and loss of home, identity, and family. They usually cling to the past. They have a harder time learning the language and so they feel ignorant and alienated. And then they watch their children growing away from them and into these brassy, abrupt, strangers. Roles are reversed as children translate for their parents and handle the affairs. It is not a healthy dynamic.

Addams recognized this dynamic early on. So she started the Hull-House Labor Museum. Inspired by *...an old Italian woman, her distaff against her homesick face, patiently spinning a thread by the simple stick spindle so reminiscent of all southern Europe. I was walking down Polk Street, perturbed in spirit, because it seemed so difficult to come into genuine relations with the Italian women and because they themselves so often lost their hold upon their Americanized children. ... [H]er face brightened as I passed and, holding up her spindle for me to see, she called out that when she had spun a little more yarn, she would knit a pair of stockings for her goddaughter. The occupation of the old woman gave me the clue that was needed. Could we not interest the young people working in the neighborhood factories in these older forms of industry, so that, through their own parents and grandparents, they would find a dramatic representation of the inherited resources of their daily occupation. If these young people could actually see that the complicated machinery of the factory had been evolved from simple tools, they might at least make a beginning toward that education which Dr. Dewey defines as "a continuing reconstruction of experience." They might also lay a foundation for reverence of the past which Goethe declares to be the basis of all sound progress. [Page 236-7]*

Mr. Fred Rogers, whose TV show Mister Rogers Neighborhood ran for many years, was a beloved children's advocate and educator. He said, "Erik Erikson, a psychologist whose insight into human development has been an important foundation of our work here in the *Neighborhood*, said that "tradition is to human beings what instinct is to animals." Imagine the chaos if animals lost their instincts. So would it be if human beings were to lose all their traditions. The study of history helps keep traditions alive. When we study how our ancestors dealt with challenges, we can (hopefully) learn from their successes and failures, and fashion our responses to challenges in even more naturally human ways." (From *the World According to Mister Rogers*)

Jane Addams understood this innately. She became a cultural broker, helping immigrants acclimate and embrace the good of their new-found home so that they could become full and healthy citizens. It was social action built on understanding, compassion, and most of all, respect for the individual worth and dignity of each person, no matter how filthy, strange, or scary. It is an acknowledgement of that common humanity felt by toddlers and artists and accounts alike.

And Addams legacy continues today, in cultural centers, social work, and community colleges all over the country, as refugees continue to come to America in search of safety, opportunity, and freedom from fear and

oppression. Nowadays, most of those immigrants have a darker skin and a darker past. They have escaped genocide, torture, and imprisonment. And they are being settled in the Midwest, in places like Fargo and Omaha where the populations aren't as dense. You can imagine the cultural shock on all sides. You can imagine the cultural shock on all sides. Now you can turn on your radio in St. Paul and two Cambodian programs - Hmong news and culture for the old, and Cambodian hip- hop and rock for the young.

In her book, *The Middle of Everywhere*, Mary Pipher writes about the refugees she has met in her hometown of Lincoln, Nebraska. She tells their stories of flight and survival, the struggles they have with American systems and policies, and what she has learned about their innate strengths and courage. She relates her own misunderstandings and mistakes, and the friendships that she has made over the years.

*...Our supermarkets and schools are bursting with refugees from Russia, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, Hungary, and Ethiopia. Our Kurdish, Sudanese, and Somali populations are rapidly increasing. Even as I write this, refugees from Afghanistan, Liberia, and Sierra Leone are coming into our community. Lincoln has often been described by disgruntled locals and insensitive outsiders as the middle of nowhere, but now it can truthfully be called the middle of everywhere. Suddenly, in Lincoln, multicultural life is a reality. And Lincoln's experience is not unique. As writer Pico Iyer puts it, "More bodies are being thrown more widely across the planet than ever before." America keeps taking people in. ...*

Pipher is a psychologist and author in Lincoln, Nebraska, and a member of the Unitarian Church. Once she thought that she would have to travel to meet different kinds of people and to learn how they thought, ate, and played. Like Eddy L. Harris, she wanted to be able to identify with other people's sufferings and dreams. But she found the world coming right into her own backyard. And despite her acceptance, Pipher confessed,

*When I first began working with refugees, I was anxious around them. I worried that I wouldn't be able to communicate or that I would accidentally offend them... I have worked to decolonize my mind and examine my ethnocentric assumptions about everything from cleanliness to psychology to what is edible. It was easy to confuse local culture with universal human nature. It was easy to assume that the way we do things was the most sensible way. Refugees would often ask me, "Why do you do it that way?" and I had to ask myself, "Yes, why do I do it that way?" ... I am trying to become better informed, and as I grow more interested the world becomes much more interesting.*

*In my interactions with newcomers, I learned the importance of keeping things simple. Instead of grand gestures or big, overwhelming events, small quiet lessons worked best. Elaborate events tended to overwhelm newcomers and involved complicated scheduling, which could set things up for failure.*

*Expensive outings, dinners in restaurants, or concert tickets could make newcomers feel beholden to me in ways that made them uncomfortable. They couldn't repay the gifts and thus felt like lesser people. Generosity could be perceived as a burden and a statement about status. I learned to let refugees give me gifts and to make sure my gifts were small enough that we could have a reciprocal relationship...*

*I learned the importance of simple good manners. For instance, I learned to remove my shoes before entering the homes of people from many parts of the world. I have worked to learn who, where, and when I can touch. I learned that to touch a Vietnamese child on the head is an insult. I learned not to blow my nose in front of Asians. I stopped being so time conscious. Sometimes I slowed down to the speed of wisdom.*

*I have grown both more and less aware of differences. I have more appreciation for the endless variations of the human experience, and yet I'm aware we are all more alike than we are different. Leonard Peltier described my feelings exactly when he wrote, "You reach across the world of otherness to one, and you touch your own soul." I have become part of that new American race that includes all colors and is characterized by Alice Walker as "people who love." Lincoln has become for me the middle of everywhere.*

I'm still new to Wilmington, and I don't know the ethnic make-up, or its history of immigration, or if there are any substantial refugee neighborhoods. But there are all kinds of ways to reach out to people and help them belong. There's the simple matter of talking to newcomers here to the church, inviting them to coffee hour and showing them around. There are movements to help immigrants and reform our policies. And as we know, we all have to be vigilant to stop the disenfranchisement of citizens as voting rights are being curtailed and blocked with ID requirements and limitations on registration. As you probably know, in Pennsylvania there is a move to change the electoral college to divvy out the votes by district, which would negate the one-person, one-vote system even more. There is plenty for us to do.

But you're already doing good work of it right here. Some of you are involved with ILYA, the Independent Living for Young Adults program, which helps foster kids who have aged out of the system. Some of these kids have no families or support systems, and few resources. Yet they're expected to be self-sufficient wage-earners right away. ILYA volunteers often become cultural brokers, helping the young people learn how to find resources, interview for jobs or college, and live in a wider social world. There are fewer language barriers, but most of them have seen trauma and loss. They may be suspicious, and they're often scared. ILYA gives them mentors and affirms their worth and dignity. These are UU values in action, right here at First U.

We all have needs, desires, and ambitions. But we deserve a level playing field. As Jane Addams wrote, "The essence of immorality is to make an exception of myself." And "Civilization is a method of living and an attitude of equal respect for all people." Let us provide a haven for the harassed, a welcome for the lonely, and a true helping hand for all of those in need of friendship, acceptance, and hope.

And let's keep up the good works.

**Closing Words: Meeting With a Stranger by James Kirkup:**

You, through whose face  
all lovely faces look, and are resolved for ever  
in your soul's true mirror:  
you, in whose unspoken words  
the irrevocable voices speak again,  
making in this less divided moment  
the remembered music that the heart accords.

O you who are myself and yet another,  
who are the world, and the unknown  
through which the town, the river,  
the familiar gardens and the fountain shines;  
here is my hand, and with it let all hands  
be given, and be held, in yours and mine.