

**“Ancestors” a sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely
Unitarian Church of Edmonton April 6, 2008**

Heroes. The word conjures up a variety of images: great sports figures whose efforts win the day, usually in the last moment; mythic figures of the ancient world who complete magnificent quests; saints whose lives stand as moral exemplars; even ordinary people who, for a moment in their lives, achieve some great feat through an act of courage or will.

In our Unitarian Universalist religion we have our share of heroes, too. There was Rev. Theodore Parker who was so reviled for helping fugitive American slaves that he used to write his sermons with a loaded pistol on his desk. There is Czech minister Norbert Capek who gave us the beloved Flower Communion and who resisted the Nazis and died in the death camps. There is Lotta Hitschmanova, the tireless Czech refugee to Canada who founded and was the heart and soul of the Unitarian Service Committee for two generations, to name just a few.

As deserving of respect and admiration as these people are, this kind of celebrated heroism poses a small problem. It ignores the everyday efforts of countless other people whose names never get remembered, except by a few. If a hero is someone who sets an example for us, then our lives are filled with them. Many of them are family – family of blood or family of choice.

Today, I want to invite you to ponder the idea of ancestors, both your own and our religious ancestors who made this church possible. You see a church community is like a family in that its beliefs and habits are passed on from generation to generation, and sometimes from congregation to congregation. There is an Olive Schreiner reflection I like to use in memorial services. It is a tribute to ordinary people who go about their lives, offer their efforts without seeking recognition or glory, and whose names never make it into the history books:

When I lie down, worn out, others will stand young and fresh. By the steps that I have cut they will climb; by the stairs I have built they will mount. They will never know the name of the one who made them. At the clumsy work they will laugh; when the stones roll they will curse me. But they will mount, and on my work they will climb, and by my stair!

A few weeks ago, Stan Calder passed into the pantheon of UCE ancestors, and while I did not choose this reading for his service, it does remind me of him. He was a modest man who saw himself as doing a few small things here and there. But as those of you who knew Stan or who attended the service heard, his ‘small’ contributions made a remarkable difference in the life of this church and in our larger faith.

There are a lot of Stan Calders in our history, people whose names many of us don’t know, but who made it possible for us to be here today. There are a lot of Stan Calders in our present, too, who are building the church my children’s children will inherit.

I find I am far more moved by this kind of unremarkable heroism, the heroism of the human race, if you will, than by the great achievements of the few. To me the eulogies at memorial services are not just the celebration of an individual life, but of entire communities, entire families, entire generations and entire congregations. No life can be completely divorced from its surroundings. Each one of us has a kind of immortality not in some everlasting paradise, but in the hearts and memories of the

people we know. Sometimes we even make a lasting impact on the people we don't know, on people we have never really met.

There is, for example, the morning manager at the Timmie's up the street. Most days I don't even speak to her, but there is something upbeat in her manner day in and day out and a warmth in her smile that does more for starting my day than any caffeine infusion. And there are unknown others who have touched my life in more shadowy ways, who have left hurts and sadness and who have pushed me towards cynicism about the prospects of the human race...like the faceless person in a pick-up truck at a fast food joint last week who just dumped the used take out bag out the window, not willing to walk five feet to the trash.

If you ever watch any of the Crime Scene Investigation shows on TV you will have heard of the principle of transference. The perpetrator of a crime always takes something away from a scene and always leaves something behind. So it is in both our casual and our meaningful interactions with others. We are always taking little lessons about life away from every connection, some good and some bad. And we are always leaving little life lessons behind, hopefully more good ones than bad...but if we have doubts about that, well rest assured, all of them are at least educational for somebody. It's the same way in church. Each of you who comes here leaves a little piece of your life and takes something away. And it is those pieces large and small that are lived here and left behind here that shape this community. You are not only the characters in the church, you are the character of the church. This community, now 54 years old is what it is today because of the ordinary people – the beloved people -who were here before.

So let's celebrate the ordinary hero, the people who built this church and who built this religion and who touched our lives.

Friday was the 102nd anniversary of the birth of Dorothy Keeler's mother, Avis Marshall McCurdy. In celebration Dorothy and Bernie have arranged for the beautiful music today and for the daffodils. Not long after Avis married Jarvis McCurdy they spent a study year in Paris. Things were tight, but on Avis' birthday in 1932, Jarvis appeared with an armload of daffs. Concerned for finances Avis gave him whatfor for splurging so extravagantly. It all evaporated when Jarvis explained he had gotten the whole bunch for a dime, and daffodils became part of the birthday tradition for the rest of their long marriage.

Because of the music and the flowers and the anniversary it feels okay to use Avis and Jarvis to illustrate this sermon. They qualify as the kind of ordinary heroes I have in mind, and I even had the pleasure of knowing them slightly. They never had any direct affiliation with this congregation to my knowledge, and yet they have helped shape it nonetheless. Avis had a strong will and a strong sense of right and wrong and a willingness to speak her mind. Dorothy Keeler's terrible shyness may make it hard to believe, but I assure you that it's true.

I got to know the McCurdy's when I was a member of the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto in the 1980's. Avis was turning 80 and was as bright and feisty as ever. She had been raised in Nova Scotia and graduated Dalhousie University, but long before that had developed a strong social conscience and a deep concern for poverty and inequity. She met Jarvis through the Student Christian Movement at Dal and they married in 1929. He was headed for the Presbyterian

ministry. But two years at Harvard and an eye opening year in Europe in the depth of the Depression changed their lives. The contrast between the visible wealth of the European churches and the poverty and suffering of the people dealt a severe blow to their shared faith. Jarvis opted to teach philosophy of religion at the University level and they both joined the Unitarian Church. Avis became active in the Home and School Association in Toronto and led the successful if highly controversial movement to exclude the teaching of religion (meaning Christianity only) from public schools. She would serve as secretary for the Toronto church's Rev. Bill Jenkins at a time when his challenging sermons would frequently appear in Monday's Globe and Mail. Her primary responsibility was to get two new Unitarian fellowships operating in the city. Later she would be instrumental in developing the adult education program, a lecture series, art programs and study groups. For her contributions she was made a member of the UU Women's Federation Clara Barton Sisterhood.

Out in the world, both Avis and Jarvis would become friends and supporters of the J.S. Woodsworth family. Woodsworth was a founder of the CCF. Both Avis and Jarvis were tireless workers for the cause and both stood as candidates in various elections.

To hear this short bio, it's obvious how Avis and Jarvis had an impact on Unitarianism in Canada and even on this congregation. They helped shape the practices and the community of Toronto First where I learned how Unitarian communities can work both for the good of itself and for the good of the world. And of course we have the examples of Dorothy and Bernie. Much of what her mother accomplished in Toronto, Dorothy Keeler has done here, (including helping start the Westwood congregation) and like her parents, the Alberta ND's would be a poorer lot in so many ways without the passion and loyalty of the Keelers.

Each congregation has its story and its personalities. The original Edmonton Church that operated from 1904 to 1936 had Professor W.H. Alexander, famously known for getting the pacifist minister fired because he would not offer prayers for the King and soldiers fighting in World War I. Professor Alexander would soon become the leader of the community as well as a frequent Sunday speaker for the next 20 years. When this congregation was reborn, I am told that a good many of Professor Alexander's students were among the first members.

John Marsh's history of the congregation in Northern Lights named a lot of the unsung heroes of the last 50 years, a few of them mentioned in our reading. Some I knew, many I did not, but there are here. They are part of this place. I'm not talking about a spiritual presence, although that might also be the case. Rather I am talking about the life lessons they offered that their religious descendants absorbed, reshaped and re-transmitted through the years.

For a good many here, your only regular exposure to Unitarianism has been through this particular congregation. They aren't all like us. This is not to lay claim to being a better congregation than any other (although we are...), but we have habits and traditions that we inherit and carry on, often without even noticing. This congregation tends to have long ministries, even when the minister has been a controversial figure. To me that suggests that the people who become leaders here take a longer view and prefer stability to quick rewards.

Though never a wealthy church, UCE tends to find the money it needs most of

the time, and when it doesn't, our history shows we know how to handle necessary frugality and still survive. Best of all we are pretty good at not getting too anxious about money. Money anxiety is one of the most destructive forces in congregational life. We are also pretty good at talking to one another when a big decision is in the wind. People in the rest of the country ask if I am proud of this church building we developed a couple of years ago. Of course I am...but I am more proud that we did it without creating a serious conflict among our members.

But friends, all of these habits and qualities are things we inherited from the people who had this congregation before us. In institutions those things I have just described, the sense of responsibility, the healthy management of anxiety and conflict are the genetic markers of this church. They are no different from the curly hair I got from my great uncle John and the tendency towards, um, portliness I inherited from Dad and Granddad.

We are their descendants, not in blood, but in faith and principle. All who choose to be members here share in that inheritance. May we preserve that treasure and celebrate the lessons from the past.