

Keeping Faith

Rev. Kathleen Owens

May 4, 2008

He stood alone on top of the hill surveying the land as the sun slowly dipped below the horizon. He was a man without a family, home or a people. Only his horse stood nearby – waiting for his command. Or at least that is how I always imagined him. The man is the character known as Natty Bumppo from James Fennimore Cooper's novels. Cooper was a writer during the time now known as the Romantic period of literature. This period doesn't mean the stories were romantic in the love sense but rather in the sense that the "novels used special techniques to communicate complex emotions and subtle meanings."¹ Art imitates life and so the literature written in the United States during the Romantic period – the years of 1820-1860 ushered in a character that reflected us as a people and a nation. Writers the like of Hawthorne, Melville and Poe had characters that were larger than life and alienated individuals. American story tellers had a whole continent of wilderness to explore, filled with dangers and strife. The hero in American literature "had to depend on his (though sometimes her) own devices. Virtually all the great American protagonists have been 'loners.' The democratic American individual had, as it were, to invent himself."²

¹ <http://www.bcps.org/offices/lis/models/amlitbkgd/individ.html>

² Ibid.

Our own principles hold the individual at the top of our list with the other six under it. And there is some logic in that. We must take responsibility and ownership of our own selves and our own actions; there must be a sense of self before there is an awareness of a larger group such as a family or community; that is clear in child development. A toddler only knows "me" "mine" "my." They don't see themselves in relationship to others around them, the larger family. That takes some grow on their part. And there has I think been a tendency to crystallize what is a natural progression of development into a structure that does not serve us well. And it has been enforced through our culture, especially in literature and the media. Sociologist Robert Bellah spoke to this tendency when he addressed our General Assembly some years ago. As I remember his address, he questioned whether it was time for us to consider a reordering of our principles so that the interdependent web – the larger community would be at the beginning of the list while the importance of the individual be placed at the bottom. Long have I wondered how might our thinking shift if we did that.

With the romantic literature I think has come the myth that we have always been a people that has stood alone and pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps, so to speak. Yet we have always been in need of another. For many of us, we trace our family generations from other lands and thus many of us here are really immigrants on this land. And as such this country has celebrated holidays and

important events from our homelands and we brought those celebrations here. I'm thinking of St. Patrick's Day or the celebrations surrounding the Chinese New Year. Tomorrow marks a very important day for many Mexican Americans – Cinco de Mayo. This holiday is not the holiday that celebrates Mexico's independence – though it is often confused as such. Cinco de Mayo is the holiday that has big significance here – more so than in Mexico. You see, it is the celebration of the battle that took place in Puebla, Mexico. That was the day that the smaller Mexican army defeated the larger and mostly French army. The United States was fighting the Civil War, remember the literature period we were in was the Romantic period, and France's army, under Napoleon the 3rd had not been defeated in 50 years. The Mexican victory that day kept the French from supplying confederate rebel soldiers another year thus allowing the US forces to grow stronger and when the battle of Gettysburg, some 14 months after the victory at Puebla. As I have read the story, people from the United States and Mexico worked together, fought together so that freedom could be found. Cinco de Mayo is a holiday that celebrates freedom and liberation.³ People kept faith with the larger ideals that are soul-enhancing. They chose to reach out to another, reach beyond a language barrier, a different culture and accept help and thus ensured freedom for others.

³ from www.vivacincodemayo.org/history

In this faith tradition – we too need to keep faith with our larger ideals and our larger community. One of the many things that makes our faith tradition unique is the concept of congregation polity. We don't have a pope or bishop or any church leader that dictates what we can and cannot do. We are a free association of churches that looks to one another for mutual support as we go about the business of transformation – both of individuals and the larger world. We have five Unitarian Universalist congregations in San Diego county. And we work together, to support one another and help spread the good news of our liberal faith. Congregational polity does not mean we get to do what we want without regards to any other body or institution. The Cambridge Platform document of 1648 states that our polity is for the betterment of the whole church, spread over many congregations – not a single one. It states that when one church is in a conflict or struggle, others will lend aid, prayer and offer help so that the church may find peace and go on about the business of its mission. This is our basis for congregational polity.

Over time, literature and reading has given way for many to the creation of and viewing of films. Individualism is at the "core of the modern Western belief system. ...Often in films the individual is associated with freedom, integrity and self-interest whereas the community is associated with restriction, compromise and

social responsibility."⁴ And there is an interesting shift from the literature of the Romantic period to the films in our time. There has been some balance between the individual and the community. However, in the 20th century some films would start with the protagonist being an individual and stressing it so – in *Casablanca* the character Rick Blaine says, "I stick my neck out for nobody" but by the end of the film, he's given up the only person he's truly loved for "The Cause." George Bailey in the film *It's a Wonderful Life* – at the beginning of it, he hates living in the small town and works to get out of it – to live his own life, his way. However, he devotes his whole life to making it a place for every person to own a home if they want one. He works for and builds a community and is richer because of it. Art imitates life and life can reflect art – it is an interconnected relationship.

It is a curious intersection the notion of the individual and the community. It is a balance we seek between the two – a balance that will enable, not competition against but cooperation within so that needs are met and work is accomplished. I believe we have a process in place to help us strike a balance between the individual and the community so that we may live out our mission we at First Church. Back in mid-September we began a process of creating a Covenant of Good Relations. The word "Covenant" is a theological word that means a promise between two parties. It is a promise that benefits both parties involved. It is a

⁴ Emanuel Levy, www.emanuelley.com/article/php?articleID=8640 Commitment and Individualism in Hollywood Cinema: Part I

mutually agreed upon and negotiated promise that offers hope and help and strength to both.

Our lead minister Arvid Straube and our affiliate minister Jim Grant preached on this subject. After the sermon a group of interested individuals went through a process to explore and eventually write a covenant of good relations – that process was facilitated by Rev. Grant. The board of trustees accepted and approved it. The Covenant of Good Relations then went before the Ministry Team Council and it has been disseminated throughout our ministry teams – each one using, exploring and discussing it. And in our annual meeting on June 8th, this congregation will vote on accepting this covenant. If you haven't seen it yet, it is on our website and also in the Ministry Team brochure and copies of that are in the office or on the patio table outside. This Covenant helps us make a promise for how we want to be in relationship with one another in this community. It holds up the value of both the individual and the community. The Covenant speaks to our longing of and needing to be respectful and valuing ourselves and others, of both the individual and the community; it emphasizes learning and areas in which we serve. It speaks to the 'how' of doing these things – and it is a first step. There is another process that is already being considered – what to do and how to be when the covenant, when the promise is broken. And it will be – from time to time for we are all human beings who make mistakes, make assumptions and on occasion

hurt one each other. How to respond and repair the covenant is the next step we will take as we become more who we yearn to be in this community.

There is a story from an unknown source that bears telling. Long ago and in a far-away town an old woman used to sit at the city gates, watching the travelers passing through, and sometimes engaging them in conversation. One night, when it was growing dark, a traveler came along, weary from a hard day's walk. Excuse me, he said to the old woman but I am looking for a place to rest and I wonder can you tell me what the people are like in this town?

The woman smiled and replied with her own question. You have had a long journey and must be weary. Tell me, where do you come from? A little surprised by her question, the traveler told her the name of his home town – Mychester, he said. Oh smiled the woman, tell me: what are the people like there in Mychester?

"Oh," replied the traveler, "you wouldn't believe how awful people there are. They don't care if you are hungry or thirsty. And if you ask for help they turn away or deliberately send you the wrong way. They are rude and mean and I'm glad to rid of them."

"My word," said the old woman. She frowned, "I'm sorry to tell you this but the people here in this town are very much like the people in Mychester. I don't think you would like them very well." Disappointed, the traveler moved on – walking to the next town.

A short time passed and soon another traveler arrived at the city gates. And again the old woman greeted him and he said, "Excuse me – I'm looking for a place to rest after my day's journey. Can you tell me what the people are like in this town?" And again the woman asked where he was from. "Oh, a little town up the road called Mychester." "Oh," she replied, "and what are the people like there in that town?"

He replied, "they are so kind – I like them a lot and will miss them. They are friendly and helpful and almost generous to a fault." The old woman smiled and said, "Well, I think you will find a warm welcome here in this city. You see, the people here are much like the ones in Mychester."

The stories we tell – about ourselves and who we are – are who and what we will become. Art and life do influence each other. This work – of keeping faith with our ideals, keeping faith with that which calls us into our best selves is a maturing process. We are growing up as a faith community beyond the adolescence of "I" and "my" into a larger understanding of "we" and "us" – And as the Piercy poem earlier said, including others and knowing who we mean when we say we. And this is why we specifically sing our closing hymn – Guide My Feet. When I sing this – it is a request to the spirit of life that she guide my feet while I run this race. Holding my hand, standing by one another – we can't do this alone – we need the spirit's guidance – we need each other as we run this race. We need to

keep faith with ourselves and with each other as we become transformed people who go out and heal the world. May it be so and blessed be.