

“Wings, Set Me Free!”
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
January 30, 2011
Bev and Elizabeth Motich, Former Worship Associates

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less travelled by...*

— Robert Frost

Opening Words
Bev Motich

When my daughter came to me about a year ago with the idea of studying in England for fall semester, I gently encouraged her to find out more about it. A semester in England was to be one of many positive steps Lizzie would make in pursuing her dreams, a goal set long ago at the age of 6 when she became enraptured with ancient British traditions and all things Victorian. I approached this latest idea with some trepidation, as she had never been away from home or me, never visited a foreign country, never flown in an airplane, and not yet lived in a college dormitory atmosphere. I kept expecting her to back out somewhere along the way, but it wasn't until the week before the trip that sheer panic set in for me. She was really going, and I couldn't show I was afraid because I didn't want her to know.

After a harrowing drive to the airport in faraway New York City, neither one of us was ready to say goodbye. We gave a gingerly hug, each being brave for the other, and as I took the escalator down and caught one last look at her face, my heart dropped. Saying good bye to my only child, who was setting off on an odyssey of adventures yet to be experienced, complete with demons yet to be battled, was the hardest thing I ever did. Most kids move out of the nest in baby steps, but for Lizzie and me, it happened all at one time.

After a few days of feeling empty and alone, we settled into a routine. She would Skype me every night at 5 o'clock, five hours ahead of “our” time. We became quite used to communicating this way and once I was assured there were people there in charge of the program that could care for her and keep her safe, I began to relax.

I then started to try to figure out exactly what I would do with my own new found freedom. The last time I lived alone was in 1978, the year before I met my late husband. I didn't realize this would be any kind of an adjustment for me until I found myself explaining to my butcher when placing my order – “I don't even KNOW what I like to eat, I've been cooking for others for such a long time.” And so began my own little odyssey – not as bold as Lizzie's, not as many posts on

Facebook – but a soul-searching journey, nonetheless. I found I liked being alone. My favorite time was on weekend mornings, sitting quietly in my kitchen with no lights on and watching the sun rise as I drank my coffee. I spent lots of time alone with my dog, cleaning the house, organizing years of useless accumulations into neat trash bags to be proudly disposed of on trash day. I did a great deal of thinking about myself and my future life, once Lizzie was really out of the house and living in her own world. It was a time of great growth for both of us.

Come on this voyage with us, and let us worship together.

Reading

Song of the Open Road (excerpt) *Walt Whitman*

*Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me, leading wherever I choose.
Henceforth I ask not good-fortune—I [myself](#) am good fortune;
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Strong and content, I travel the open road.*

Sermon

Wings, Set Me Free

Elizabeth Motich

Traveling to England was a lifelong dream. It began with dewy visions of PBS' Masterpiece Theatre Victorians, gallivanting around their green and sparkly countryside with foxes and hounds. This foreign beauty and old-world snobbiness was so familiar and wonderful to me, even when I was kindergarten-aged. I stored this dream on a mental shelf for years as I did research, exploring British culture from the outside in. I methodically learned every traditional ballad and folk song, sung by hundreds of revivalist singers. From songs, I started to get a sense of cultural themes, of dialects and county names. I learned folklore, history and legends, from stories of King Arthur and the ancient Celts to obscure facts about folk heroes like highwaymen and thieves. My favorite topic of weird collected knowledge centered on the life of Queen Victoria and her family. Victoria came to the English throne in 1819 at the age of 18. I developed respect for her because she never hesitated to speak her mind during her 60 year reign and she was only 4'11" tall. She has been identified for years as a symbol of the female repression that occurred during her era, but my open-minded attitude towards history

perceives her as a historical role model of feminism in a time of great change.

I began to study British history at a deeper level when I was a teenager. I immersed myself in a bygone fictional utopia that I hoped I could recreate in my heart. I was repelled by the world of average high school students, and while other friends cherished their roles in the popular crowd and strived to enshroud themselves in the chameleon garments of “everybody else” I found myself looking for a boring way to rebel. I was not a punk or a goth, I despised those movements as part of this modern world and our current material culture. I also never fit in with the depressed writer and artist crowd. I was a geek, a free-thinking, dedicated child of my hippie parents, a good student, and the Alan Ginsberg spark that flowed through my blood refused to let mainstream culture form my thoughts. I decided that I would rebel by not rebelling. With some modern adaptations and admitted anachronisms, I became a Victorian.

This was not a decision I took lightly. It involved years of intricate research as well as a development of an internal code of conduct that mixed the virtues of the past with my modern Unitarian values. Though I was morally ashamed of the class struggles and humanist conflicts that the Victorian era brings to mind, I couldn't help but slip into the mindset that the past was somehow better. My 10 year old self who dressed stuffed animals in fur coats and hosted banquets on the imaginary Titanic still lived deep within my core, trapped in a repetition of happy fantasy.

I thought that maybe there was a way to access this self-created utopia. Perhaps there was a country where people were well-mannered, invested in history, and grew up appreciating their cultural heritage. When I imagine inner peace, I think of academics holding discussions by a roaring fire, a ballroom full of people who can recite poetry and literature by heart. Somehow I thought that if I enveloped myself in London's fog and stared at some sheep on rolling green hills for a few months, my life would sort itself out and I would become my ultimate self. A college course last Spring on the romantic poets, taught by an excellent professor, sealed the deal. As I read the visual poetry of Wordsworth and Keats, who described this glorious dream country in languorous detail, I knew that I had to go to England as soon as possible. King Arthur and druids and Sherlock Holmes and Queen Victoria all stirred into this tornado of fantasy that urged me on towards my goal. My excitement abated slightly during one class, when my professor explained a Wordsworth poem involving a hike through Switzerland. She made the point that the sublime, Wordsworth's description for a sensory natural awe that could not easily be put into words, was not simply provoked by purposeful seeking or traveling. She argued that it was a state conjured in the mind and the imagination, not purchased through a travel agency, and to seek it out through artificial means was pointless.

Nevertheless, I lived and dreamed the rest of the semester through dull study abroad orientation sessions, an unpleasant summer job that funded part of the trip, packing and heartbreakingly leaving my mom, and getting on a plane for the first time in my life (an 8 hour flight). I thought that I had made the correct, and poetic decision to visit England on the first morning, as we raced seemingly at the speed of light towards landing, and the flight attendants unfurled the window shades to reveal the sun gleaming golden over London's monuments.

The study abroad coordinator accurately described the first few weeks as "the honeymoon period". I was miserably homesick for a few days, but I began to meet future friends and the wacky British ladies who served as our counselors while in England. We visited a real Medieval castle (which weirdly resembled Hershey Park with its tacky splendor) and I was stunned with sunny natural beauty on our trip to the coasts of Cornwall, where the sea lapped against the southernmost cliffs of England. And then, we came back to the dorms where we would spend our next months, and with a trumpeting of bad music, the howls of anarchist students setting off fire alarms, and late night drunken revelry participated in by the people who lived on the floor above me, the honeymoon was soundly over. I endured living with beer bottles and bodily fluids in the corridor, moldy dishes in the kitchen, and begrudgingly hanging out with people who had a tradition of writing obscene words on their clothes and attending a Tuesday night 20-pub drinking event called "Carnage". Several weeks prior to leaving, the capstone of the experience was reading the resident assistant's message on Facebook about vandalism of the laundry room: "Laundry room is out of order until further notice. There are signs up. Please don't tear the signs down, they're there for a reason. Police need to see the room as it is."

On a daily basis, I faced the very real moral consequences of whether to live to my own standards and devote myself to studying and traveling, or please other people by going out to clubs and drinking. I was raised in a home with feminist attitudes and religiously liberal values and I was taught to make own choices and emphasize doing hard work in college and maintaining politeness above everything else, but the culture surrounded me like a whirlwind, pressing down on me for not living up to its short-skirted token gestures of beauty. The only fun thing about living with drunk people is being the sober one who can record all of the mayhem. My friend and I witnessed an inebriated Scotsman singing "Country Roads" by John Denver late one night, and seeing a bunch of British guys latch arms in a pub and sing "We Are the Champions" was a quintessentially British experience. While I pray every day that I will find a man who values intellectual integrity and kindness over a woman who looks good in hot pants, and a group of friends my own age who appreciate book discussions over beer pong tournaments, I now acknowledge that these are rare commodities, no matter the global location. Along the way I made several friends who were each in their own way searching for paradise in Cheltenham, England. One friend was an African-American girl

from inner city Baltimore who had gone to college in rural Pennsylvania expecting freedom and reward for hard work, only to face intense racial scrutiny and frustration. In England, she found a different, more diverse and equality-focused population. Her utopia had a foundation in reality, and I was so happy for her. Another friend's father had died in the past year, leaving her heartbroken and running away from her life at home. Her road to peace couldn't be found in a trip across continents, but I realized through comforting her by sharing my own experiences that fellow travelers can always come to our aid.

The concept of travel, especially travel from America to anywhere in Europe, is always fueled by the collective dreams and erudite wishes of generations. People whispered to me that this trip would change my life. I would come home with memories of friends and romantic experiences, imbued with a glorious sense of sophisticated cultural awareness. I will not deny that the journey had a profound impact on my life, but the skills I gained had nothing to do with my own Victorian fantasies of finding a snobby utopia, or collective cultural fantasies of "Eat, Pray, Love" style bliss. Confronting the realistic locations of dreamed-about places was difficult. So you don't have to ask, I will flat out tell you I did not have a mystical experience at Stonehenge. I also did not go to Paris and fall in love with someone named Jean-Claude. I am now faced with the internal struggle of how to find a new dream. I often asked my mother over Skype, what happens when someone needs to find new life goals, a new fulfilling moment? England was both anticlimactic and, in small doses, incredible. I didn't confront the ghost of Elizabeth I in Westminster Abbey, but I did sit on the Victoria Memorial statue at night on a cool autumn evening with several friends and watch the lights of London surround me. To deny that there were real moments of beauty, of Wordsworth's indescribable sublime, would eliminate numerous positive memories.

Whether for good or ill, there are inevitable life changes that accompany transitioning from being someone who couldn't drive and was stuck at home for a solid year to being a person who can get on a city bus and navigate correct stops to find my way alone to London. It's a mindset that promotes a life of wandering. Later this year, I'm faced with the decision to transfer to a different college due to financial reasons and a generally unsettled feeling. I started to think about going to school in the mountains of Tennessee. I thought that if my own dream life couldn't be located in England, then I would live my father's unfulfilled fantasies of taking courses in Appalachian folklore, in studying musicology. This romantic notion was set aside recently too, with the thought that I will just live simplistically for a few more years. Maybe the issue is that wonderful life changes can't be summoned at will. Magic came to me once before in this common place, when I was writing my first book, and maybe it can find me again. It may not follow the principles of Kaizen-continuous improvement, but maybe simplicity and inertia will bear fruits of contentedness.

Finally, there is an attitude I want to address, a privileged point of view that often strikes middle class young adults in my age group. It is the concept of home as a thing to be left behind in the dust, to be eschewed and despised. If everyone in this generation abandons their childhood homes, we will not only be losing out on local traditions and native heritage, but we forsake ancient traditions as well. No one dared to tell Odysseus that Ithaca was some boring backwater and he should stay in Troy instead. I subscribe to the truth that Wordsworth and Mary Oliver understood home is not something to be forcibly left behind, because beauty surrounds us. Central Pennsylvania doesn't contain the strikingly lovely cliffs of Cornwall, England; but in your busy lives, have you paused to look towards a field on a cold day and noticed that the white bellies of the deer perfectly match the patterned snow and sleeping fields? The romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge must have realized this abundant beauty, because he picked not the English River Wye, but the banks of the Susquehanna to frame his version of utopia, when as a young man he dreamed of a perfect place he had never traveled to. I have come to realize that utopia is not an outward destination, but an internal feeling. We will always be dreaming of far off places, always startled by wanderlust, but for now I am happy to yet again gather the sights of winter and know that I am home. I hold this feeling in my heart wherever I travel.

Homecoming
Bev Motich

December 18 was the day we had looked forward to for some time, the day Lizzie would return home. I had spent hours planning the arrangements to get myself to JFK airport to meet her. The refrigerator was stocked with her favorite treats, and we looked forward to spending a nice week together before celebrating Christmas. The weather in England was unpredictable that week but Lizzie's two hour trip to the airport was uneventful. It was when the group got to London-Heathrow that the snow set in. I was receiving updates every 30 minutes on my cell phone and decided to start my train trip up to meet her as it seemed they might be delayed but would surely still get the runways cleared. Halfway to New York, I heard the flight was cancelled. Lizzie called me frantically. Knowing that the airlines would have to reschedule her, I was unable to do any more to help her. The earliest she would be leaving now would be another three days. Meanwhile, her group of 13 students was planning to sleep at the airport.

I got to New York and turned around to head home again, as there was nothing more I could do. While waiting in the station for my train home to be announced, I struck up a conversation with a young girl sitting next to me. She was a college student from Brazil, away from her parents from the first time, travelling to Vermont (of all places!) for the holidays. As I started to tell her about my own daughter's plight, suddenly I couldn't stop the tears streaming down my face. I

was so worried about her. This young lady smiled at me and spoke with her beautiful, heavy accent, “Don’t worry. God will take care of you and your daughter!”

I was overcome with the feeling of God’s love, and how maybe this little angel had been sent to help me, to let me know that someone or something cared about us. I find it so hard sometimes to have blind faith in things other people believe in. But I was struck by the universal language of love that I heard in this young girl’s voice, the love we all share regardless of speech, culture, or faith. God will take care of you. What a powerful thing to believe in!

It kept coming back to me in the long week ahead, as Lizzie’s second flight was rescheduled yet another time, for Christmas Eve. I prayed to that God that she would come home safely, and we did finally meet that night at the airport, in time to celebrate a very different kind of Christmas, with a whole new meaning for us both. I don’t know if it was Santa Claus, or God, or a little of both, who got her home safely, but I found myself believing just a little bit more.

Closing Words
from Tintern Abbey (excerpt)
William Wordsworth

*And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.*

