

OPENING WORDS – 25 Sep 2016
Louis Jenkins: “Flight” – Just Above Water (1997)

Past mishaps might be attributed to an incomplete understanding of the laws of thermodynamics or perhaps even to a more basic failure of the imagination, but were to be expected. Remember, this is solo flight unencumbered by bicycle parts, aluminum and nylon or even feathers. A *tour de force*, really. There’s a lot of running and flapping involved and as you get older and heavier, a lot more huffing and puffing. But on a bright day like today with a strong headwind blowing in from the sea, when, having slipped the surly bonds of common sense and knowing she is watching, waiting in breathless anticipation, you send yourself hurtling down the long green slope to the cliffs, who knows? You just might make it.

READING – 25 Sep 2016
William H. Houff – “Musings of a Pigherder”
Infinity in Your Hand: A Guide for the Spiritually Curious (1989)

One of the skills I learned as a farmboy was how to herd critters – cows, sheep, pigs, chickens. It’s not easy – the uninitiated can get into all sorts of trouble.

Pigs are usually the greatest challenge.

Most people thinks pigs are dirty and stupid. Both notions are false. Pigs do enjoy lying in nice, cool mud, especially on hot days. But they are really very clean in their personal habits. And they certainly aren’t stupid.

As I said, herding pigs is a special challenge. They need to mill first. Anyone trying to move a batch of pigs without letting them stand about and shuffle and grunt first will encounter passive resistance.

The inexperienced or insensitive pigherder who fails to interpret this resistance properly will shortly be surprised. The pigs, heads slightly lowered, suddenly emit an explosive “Oink!” and take off at top speed in all directions. The time spent in getting them reassembled can be considerable.

When it comes to getting them moving in a certain direction, people aren’t all that different from pigs. We need to mill first, especially if the intended direction is an unfamiliar one. Pushed too hard, we first resist and, second, bolt and run off in all directions. Getting us back together can be time-consuming or even impossible.

Who's On First? – Locating Interim Ministry, Part I
First Parish UU of Medfield – 25 Sep 2016
Rev. David W. Chandler

We were sitting around the table, enjoying a very convivial conversation after a fabulous potluck dinner, when the talk turned to backyard farm animals – chickens, horses, goats, cows, geese. These are not household pets but not exactly agricultural either. Well, wait a minute – my wife Sally's family did have a pet pig. Of course it got too big for the house, and it sounds like it also got too ornery as well. Goodbye, pig.

And I remembered “Musings of a Pigherder,” which you have just heard. All the new UU Interim Ministers had to read this story as part of our training – I wonder why? Do you imagine the UUA was trying to tell us something? I wonder what it might be?

“Leading Unitarian Universalists” can be considered an oxymoron, like “Army intelligence.” Earnest but futile as such attempts may be, they have long been described as “herding cats.” This is unfair to cats. Somehow I don't think the change in metaphor is in support of the farm-to-table movement. The transparent point is to understand pigs – I mean, people. They need time. People need time to understand change, time to consider its merits or lack of them, time to move ourselves along as and if we choose.

The more important point is that pigs can indeed move as a group. This is not the nature of cats, no matter what you try. The new metaphor is more optimistic. You might even borrow some of our traditional language and call it a version of “the larger hope.” A group of people – call it a congregation – can move together if they go about it the right way. Even the freest of free associations can locate direction and momentum. You have done interim ministry in the not-too-distant past, so maybe this is already a clear possibility in your minds. We will revisit it because interim ministry does evolve.

The right way will certainly start with patience. There is no such thing as a church emergency, unless the fire alarm goes off. But the second “p” word is also necessary – persistence. Milling around for a bit is okay, but at the end of the day we must decide, and we must move. The committee of the whole must commit.

The third motivating word is purpose. We consider change because we want to get somewhere. We go ahead with it because our purpose currently feels incomplete or unfulfilled, and therefore unsatisfactory. We are compelled to move. Better yet, we conceive a purpose not previously seen – we move because we are inspired.

Best of all worlds – people moving because they are inspired. Inspired by the destination is good. Inspired by the journey itself is better. It is closer to the lesson of life itself. How you go is more important than where you get to, and the getting to is actually a continuous arrival – a day-by-day pilgrimage into the riches of experience.

“Who’s on first – what’s on second” – you know the routine. It could be the Red Sox, but it’s not. It is a timeless metaphor of confusion and miscommunication. What prevents congregations from being inspired to movement? They will tell you – and each other – it is a lack of resources. Experts are unanimous: This is almost never the real reason. A church spending a million dollars a year will swear it lacks resources. A church holding a million dollar endowment will swear it lacks resources. It is baloney – and just as much for a church a tenth that size. Been there, done that, got the t-shirt.

The whiteboard tribe – you know who I mean – will pronounce lack of vision. People do spend hours and hours in one technique or another, one workshop after another, “clarifying our mission and vision.” This can be another form of milling around – with bullet points and boxes and arrows, and a camel is a horse by committee. It is very good news you have carried this uncertain process through to a most productive conclusion. We must continue to remember mission statements require to be lived, and visions may be captured in words, but do not announce themselves that way.

Don’t get me wrong. Resource constraints are real. Planning and discussion are essential. What I am targeting here is the alpha and omega of useless, energy draining, and disingenuous *excuses*. There are always obstacles. What human endeavor does not include them? The truth is, human beings thrive on obstacles. We go through, we go around, we go over, and we go under. Obstacles? Our evolutionary genius is to prevail.

The real culprit, the stuck-in-the-muck, the rope binding our feet, is confusion and miscommunication. We are rich in resources – of dedication, caring, experience and even (sssh) *money* – but we are confused about what these are for. Confused, I mean, not at all in the sense of ignorance but in a broader compass – lack of clarity. This is the entanglement with miscommunication. Is our purpose clear? Is it the right one? Are we applying our resources to it? Are we getting results? If not, are we clear about how to change course and what to try next?

You will note there are never final and everlasting answers to these questions. That would, among other things, be insufferably dull. An organization that is confused

and miscommunicating can be one with everybody running off in different directions at high speed – like the pigs. It can also be an organization that is resolute in its complacency. That is the existential challenge facing most UU churches. It's the Charge of the Light Brigade without the thrilling ride or all the bloodshed, but just as fatally lacking in true direction or impact. You will remember they got the wrong orders.

An organization that is unconfused may buzz with activity, but everybody knows what everybody else is doing, even if not directly involved. That is the quality of good communication. An organization that is unconfused may be a solid phalanx of unified initiative, busy getting there in good march step, not confined but powerfully acting as one. That is another quality of good communication. An unconfused organization apprehends both obstacles and opportunities, engages them fully in a continuous feedback of action and evaluation and renewed action. There is no rush, but rather a calmness of humming vitality, the essential dynamic of every particle of the universe.

Apparently the proper way to herd pigs is with a stick, ticking them on the shoulder as indication of the desired direction – or so my dinner companions advised. Here is where we leave the metaphor behind, perhaps a little the worse for being stretched already too far. You are not pigs. I am not a pigherder. No kidding.

On the other hand, it is the responsibility of every minister, even an Interim Minister, to tick you on the shoulder when necessary. We use words, not sticks. We use “inside voice” – as we tell the kids. In an interim ministry the judgment about when that might be “necessary” is deliberately more circumspect than in a settled ministry. It is constrained by a strict time limit. It is rooted by informed consent. We all agree this work belongs to you, this interim process. We agree you are fully capable. You will seek with your own good judgment and move at your own chosen pace.

We also agree on a matter of common sense – it is a good idea to get some help. I am here to care for you, and to help. It is my job to listen more than talk, to suggest more than propose, to offer skills that might be useful – but not too often. It is proper for me to initiate some changes, if only to underline your ability to live with change. I will offer opinions, but not too often and – as noted – not too loud. I assume you too are willing to listen. I am looking forward to a very fulfilling relationship with you all.

Who's on first? Your minister is, of course. We are here together.

Amen. Blessed Be. Shalom. Salaam.

CLOSING WORDS – 25 Sep 2016

Jane Kenyon: “Coming Home at Twilight in Late Summer” – Collected Poems (2005)

We turned into the drive,
and gravel flew from the tires
like sparks from a fire. So much
to be done – the unpacking, the mail
and papers; the grass needed mowing.
We climbed stiffly out of the car.
The shut-off engine ticked as it cooled.

And then we noticed the pear tree,
the limbs so heavy with fruit
they nearly touched the ground.
We went out to the meadow; our steps
made black holes in the grass;
and we each took a pear,
and ate, and were grateful.