

SIGN LANGUAGE

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
BUC, Candidating Sunday, January 9, 2011

Sunday morning in a rural traditional church, and the young preacher had just finished his first sermon. It had been a terrible presentation, alternately trite and obscure, poorly delivered and painful to listen to. After the service, one of the parishioners, an elderly farmer, approached the minister and said, “I hear, young fellow, that you used to be a farmer like me. Whatever made you decide to leave your family farm and become a preacher?”

The young minister replied earnestly, “It was a miracle! I received a sign.”

“What kind of sign?” asked the old farmer.

“Well, I was out plowing the fields early one afternoon in the springtime, on a beautiful clear, sunny day. Suddenly dark clouds gathered at the horizon and loomed toward me. A terrible wind came up, the clouds swirled in the sky above me, and I grew sore afraid.”

“That does sound frightening,” agreed the old farmer.

“Yes, but suddenly the wind died down. The swirling of the clouds slowed and stopped, and they formed themselves into two letters in the sky.”

“Two letters?”

“Yes, two letters written in dark clouds in the sky. And the sunlight made a silver lining around each of the letters.”

“What were they?”

“The letter *p* and the letter *c*, glowing in the sky. And I knew right then that my life would change, that I was receiving a sign. *P* meant *preach*, and *c* meant *Christ*. *Preach Christ*.

“I see,” said the old farmer slowly. “But did you ever think those letters might have meant *plant corn*?”

Signs give direction, tell us where to go and what to do, but signs are subject to interpretation—sometimes very different interpretations that send us down different roads, toward different possibilities. We may preach, or we may plant corn.

Since last fall, you, the members and friends of BUC, and I have been engaged in some close inspection of signs to determine what sort of relationship we might have. Was ours to be a transitional partnership, a ministry with deadlines and specific tasks to be accomplished, so that we parted ways in the summer with a sense of satisfaction at completing work together and moving on to the next ministerial relationship? Or could we see in the signs an indication of other possibilities, a chance for a longer relationship where there still might be deadlines and specific tasks, but those would unfold within the context of an open-ended journey, based not so much on a contract but on a covenant and a growing trust? Were we a good match for one kind of relationship for one year, or a good match for another kind of relationship over a longer time? Different signs, with different meanings, pointing us in dramatically different directions with a world of difference in the consequences.

Spiritual traditions everywhere at all times have encouraged us to pay attention and be alert, to watch for signs—from deities and devils, from scriptures and stories, from leaders and from the inmost reaches of our hearts. The universe beyond and within the

self, it seems, is in constant communication, disclosing patterns of meaning that can guide us on our way and reassure us that our actions are not random nor in vain.

However, the traditions also at all times have cautioned that signs must be read carefully.

Unlike signs in the everyday world, spiritual signs may not come with a clear, readily recognized meaning. They require interpretation, and that interpretation must be done carefully to ensure that we do not go astray.

Few spiritual paths have struggled as much, or as intensely, with sign language and interpretation as Unitarian Universalism. We parse and define, scrutinize and debate, refine and rewrite the words we use in an endless effort to reach a common, unambiguous meaning. Because many of us found the signs in our childhood religions misleading or even wrong, we are determined not to be fooled again. So we wrestle with our religious language, discard and put up new signs and then add additional signs explaining the forgoing signs until one day we reach the end of our patience, rip out all the signs and start over—or else resolve to live without benefit of signs because the whole effort is pointless anyway and randomness is all there is.

For those who struggle to read the signs, life has gotten much easier in recent times with the development of GPS systems. It even seems possible, given their growing popularity, that the day is not far off when we will never get lost, never be unsure of our directions, since those satellites that position us, like technological versions of an all-seeing God, are able to track us anywhere, all the time.

When my son came for a visit this past fall and wanted to sightsee areas of Detroit that I had not yet discovered, he proudly made use of a GPS app on his new phone. He

plugged in only the vaguest information and we set off, with the phone easily, painlessly talking us along on our sightseeing excursion.

For the beauty of the GPS system, as those of you who use them know, is that it is intended to work with even the most directionally challenged, distracted by talking on a cell phone, driver. It provides a step-by-step outline to the desired destination, includes prompts to “turn right here” or “take the next exit,” so clear, so perfectly clear, that it would seem nobody would miss a direction. Yet when a direction is missed, despite the clear guidelines the GPS provides, it simply adapts. It speaks one word, “recalculating,” then takes into account the driver’s error and comes up with a new set of directions that still promise to guide to the desired destination. And apparently the GPS will recalculate again and again, as often as needed, to get you where you hope to go.

Ever since hearing how this system works, I have been fascinated by that wonderfully patient, nonjudgmental response, “recalculating.” How much more typical would it be to have a GPS system that reacts to mistakes and changes of mind the way we do. My own internal GPS system is far more likely to yell out, “You dummy, you missed the turn back there.” Or, when I make the same mistake over and over, still not learning, my GPS may very well throw up its hands and quit, pronouncing me hopeless.

How does your personal, spiritual GPS system respond when you take a wrong turn, misread a sign, make an unwise choice, get distracted and overlook something important, stubbornly persist in doing something that is hurtful to yourself and others? Does your inner GPS berate you, criticize you, abandon you? How forgiving are you able to be of yourself? And how forgiving of others—family, friends, neighbors, church members, fellow citizens, political leaders, ministerial leaders, community leaders—when you are

quite certain they have made a wrong move? The forgiving response would be the one the GPS offers, “recalculating.” Are we able to offer “recalculating” to one another, to ourselves, when we blow it—*especially* when we have what seem to be clear guidelines and a sure way to reach our goals, and somehow we manage to miss the turn anyway, misread the signs? Because if “recalculating” is not built into our inner GPS, we have only the option of waiting, thinking, micromanaging, second-guessing, each tiny move, or else simply deciding never to leave home because the possibilities for misdirection are too great to overcome.

Perhaps the combination of growing up in a church that insisted one must discern and follow God’s will like a preprogrammed set of life instructions, and growing up in a household where parents took a dim view of a child’s ability to make good choices, resulted in my spending many of my adult years learning how to chart a course for myself. If drawn on paper, my life path would resemble a series of mountain switchbacks, curving from one side to the other, not covering much distance with each curve but nonetheless moving steadily along up a steep slope. My inner GPS system spoke so very quietly that it took me awhile to hear it over the noise of competing voices, and still longer to trust that it might actually direct me on a wise course. Whether determining a career path, a congregational calling, who to marry, whether to become a parent and how to parent once I had a child, where to live, how to live with integrity and love: all those choices, large and small have required ongoing attending to my spiritual GPS system while continuing to read the myriad of signs, indicators, pointers, clues around, among, and within, inviting me sometimes to preach, sometimes to plant corn. Signs are confusing. But signs also offer a comforting reminder that we do not journey

alone or randomly or accidentally. Others have traveled the same road we travel now; others have faced the same choices we face now. And the reassurance that it is always possible to recalculate—or, as our Universalist ancestors put it in the language of their time, the reassurance that God never, never gives up on us—makes it possible to keep walking, no matter how dark the way or difficult the path.

You and I have asked our respective GPS systems to do some significant recalculating in the journeys that led us to one another and the decision to be made this morning. You had expected to have a settled minister long before now, and it was not to have been me; I had expected to work through this transitional year with you and move on to another congregation. But something powerful, something mysterious has been present among us, offering signs, inviting us to recalculate one again and consider whether we might launch a ministerial partnership here, now. Whatever the decision ultimately reached, it will be necessary for us to continue a careful observation of signs and a willingness to recalculate our directions if we intend our ministry to unfold beyond a happy beginning.

After these months of asking questions of one another, after this week in which questions have been asked again, I know that I am ready to plug directions into my GPS system that will set me on a journey with you; I hope you have reached a similar readiness as you vote this morning. In case any uncertainties remain, I invite you to listen to this poem by a Native American Elder, Oriah Mountain Dreamer, who describes what is most important for us to know about one another in order to make the commitment we consider this morning:

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living.
I want to know what you ache for,
and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are.
I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love,
for your dreams, for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon.
I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow,
if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become
shriveled and closed from fear of further pain.

I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own,
without moving to hide it or fade it or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own,
if you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you ...
without cautioning us to be careful, be realistic

It doesn't interest me if the story you're telling me is true.
I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself,
if you can bear the accusation of betrayal and not
betray your own soul.

I want to know if you can see beauty
even when it is not pretty every day,
and if you can source your life from God's presence.

I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine,
and still stand on the edge of a lake
and shout to the silver of the full moon, "Yes!"

It doesn't interest me to know where you live
or how much money you have.
I want to know if you can get up after the night of grief and despair,
weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done
for the children.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied.
I want to know what sustains you from the inside
when all else falls away.

I want to know if you can be alone with yourself,
and if you truly like the company you keep in empty moments.

It doesn't interest me who you are, how you came to be here.
I want to know if you will stand in the center of the fire with me
and not shrink back.

I look forward to hearing the results of your voting on whether to extend a call to me to be your next settled minister. And know this: I would count it the greatest honor to stand in the center of the fire with you.