

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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True Colors

"I took my large, black leather bible, stood among the people in the midst of the sanctuary at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Mankato, Minnesota, and read the text for the day, saying 'The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark, the third chapter.'"

Luke Stevens-Royer, a candidate for our ministry, is speaking of coming out as a Unitarian Universalist to the people of the church of his childhood. He continues, quoting Mark, "Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to Jesus and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of G*d is my brother and sister and mother.' And I said, 'The Gospel of the Lord,' and I closed my bible, and glanced at my parents and grandparents and my then-fiance sitting in the third pew as I made my way up the four solid stairs into the high, stone pulpit.

"The gathered community sat down," Luke Stevens-Royer continues. "I looked out into the community that had nurtured me, supported me, and loved me since the age of two. I looked again at my family, where I, too, had sat for countless Sundays. And I began to preach.

"I preached the message that Jesus was preaching in that Gospel – I preached a message that redefined family, that gathered community around shared values and ethics rather than blood-related kindred alone. What constituted family in that text were those who did the will of G*d, those who lived lives of love and integrity, compassion and healing. Never had I imagined that a Gospel message would speak so strongly and directly and convincingly to me, enough to make me, in the words of Luther, "venture paths as yet untrodden."

"And so it was. And the congregation, knowing the implications of what I was

saying, but not the deeper story, squirmed a bit but responded kindly, as they always did. My family, knowing the implications of this text and our shared reverence for it, couldn't argue with what I had said – because it was from their sole source of truth. And at the same time, their hearts must have been beginning to break, as I used the words of Jesus to separate myself from them. And the journey began.

"I embarked in a new way toward something mysterious, not knowing the destination, but filled with both terror and exhilaration. I began questioning the old orthodox teachings. I began believing that one's own thought and experience were valid, I began to believe that reason and logic were as important as mystical experience. I began a perspective of freedom, of intellectual and spiritual freedom."

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Do you know the song:

... I see your true colors
Shining through.
I see your true colors,
... that's why I love you
So don't be afraid to let them show
Your true colors,
true colors,
Are beautiful like a rainbow....¹

Luke Stevens-Royer had wrestled mightily with his sense of guilt, of betraying his past. But he is a seeker, so he can do nothing less than embrace the truth as he experiences it; he is a true lover of truth. I am deeply moved by his leap of faith: risking everything for an all-in faith, for a religious tradition and a spiritual community to which he says an unconditional *yes* – deeply moved by his devotion to flying his true colors.

Home for the holidays, he worships with his family again, back at their Lutheran church, and feels, he says, "like a stranger in the most familiar place in the world." Back at school, returning to his Unitarian Universalist congregation, he feels – this is a quote – "like family in the strangest place in the world."²

I know some of you have walked a path like Luke's to arrive here. I think of Mahatma Gandhi's words,

¹ Billy Steinberg and Tom Kelly, *True Colors* (chorus)

² Luke Stevens-Royer, *Authentic Living*, preached at White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church, 18 July, 2010

I know the path; it is straight and narrow.
 It is like the edge of a sword.
 I rejoice to walk on it.
 I weep when I slip.
 G*d's word is: "The [one] who strives never perishes."
 I have implicit faith in that promise.
 Though, therefore, from my weakness I fail a thousand times,
 I shall not lose faith.

Some of you have walked that path, and, if we're brave, all of us will take the risk to be true to our truth, to dare to leap, to unfurl the flag of our true colors, to come home and go forth from the sanctuary of this beloved community, to put our hearts against the world, and say *yes*.

Some years ago, my friend and colleague Christopher Holton Jablonski was co-leading a weeklong meditation retreat. At the end of one of the first meditations, a 70-year-old gentleman named Ramesh began to weep openly. "It was hard for him to find words," Christopher remembers. "He said that he was very new to all this, and skeptical at first, but now ... now, he was grateful."

"He said he had flirted with ideas of a spiritual life for years, but always found reasons not to dive in. First it was career and family obligations that kept him away. Then, he said, he had his life. It was, by all accounts, a good life, but even then, there was a hollow feeling. Finally, Ramesh said, there in that meditation circle, after years of dodging it, years of being held back by fear, he began to wake up to his truth. He felt connected for the first time. And in that connection, in the intimate embrace of that circle, he was safe enough to *feel*. He opened. And a whole new way of being, a whole new way opened."³

It's never too late. But let's not wait. Let's not wait to walk that path like the edge of a sword, to open our hearts, and fly our true colors.

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I have recently reread *Letters to a Young Poet*, and was touched again by the 27-year-old poet Rilke's advice to a 19-year-old student at the military academy. Here's my favorite passage, from the forth letter.

Rilke writes, "I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience

³ paraphrased from the first draft of Chris Holton Jablonski, *Life, Abundantly*, to be preached today, 2/6/11, at First Parish in Bedford, MA

with everything unresolved in your heart, and to try to *love the questions themselves*, as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language.... And the point is to *live everything. Live the questions now.*"

I think about how easy it would have been for Luke Stevens-Royer to keep his doubts to himself, letting the benefits of the familiar outweigh his misgivings. I think about how unremarkable it would have been for Ramesh to skip the meditation retreat, and carry on in his pretty-good or good-enough life, banishing the hollow feeling. I think about how much less complicated it is to live with easy answers than to love the questions, and live the questions. But easy, unremarkable, and less complicated are not the hallmarks of the spiritual life. It takes work to grow a soul ... to risk seeking our truth, to walk that path like the edge of a sword, to chance the leap of faith, to unfurl the flag of our being and fly our true colors. We don't just arrive; we become.

Here's a beautiful poem from Mary Oliver. She calls it *The Journey*.

One day you finally knew
 what you had to do, and began,
 though the voices around you
 kept shouting
 their bad advice –
 though the whole house
 began to tremble
 and you felt the old tug
 at your ankles.
 “Mend my life!”
 each voice cried.
 But you didn't stop.
 You knew what you had to do,
 though the wind pried
 with its stiff fingers
 at the very foundations,
 though their melancholy
 was terrible.
 It was already late
 enough, and a wild night,
 and the road full of fallen
 branches and stones.
 But little by little,

as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do –
determined to save
the only life you could save.

Beloved spiritual companions, may we, too,
 summon the courage to risk being true to our truth,
 love the questions and live the questions,
 walk a path like the edge of a sword,
 dare to leap,
 put our open hearts against the world.
May we unfurl the flag and fly our true colors.
 Let us say an unconditional *yes*.