

# Sabbatical Reflections

---

A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

By Christine Robinson

June 7, 2015

*Why do you go away? So that you can come back. So that you can see the place you came from with new eyes and extra colors. And the people there see you differently, too. Coming back to where you started is not the same as never leaving – Terry Pratchett*

## Seeing the Aurora

What's a sabbatical? It's a chance to leave the myriad of small stuff and weekly deadlines and emergencies which is a major characteristic of parish ministry to do an extended project or focus on just a few things. It's a chance to get some training or make a contribution to the denomination as a whole. It's a chance to see one's colleagues in action...something that those of us who do our public work all in the same hour of the week have difficulty doing. It's a rest from the intensity of parish ministry. The last four years, which encompassed a capital campaign, a miracle Sunday, the building of this new sanctuary, and the adjustment of the staff and program and leaders and volunteers to an uncomfortable amount of newness and a lot of unintended consequences, was particularly intense. I was not just tired when I left you on January 31, I was worn out. It's much better, now!

I spent the first month of my sabbatical just catching my breath, dealing with things around the house that had been neglected, and getting ready to go to Alaska. As I left, on March 1, the daffodils were beginning to show color and it was starting to feel like Spring. As I packed my boots, sweaters, long underwear and uber-mittens, and jammed my Boston-era parka under my arm, I couldn't help but think that spending March in Fairbanks, where it was -7° had seemed like a much better idea in December.

I went to Fairbanks in March to see the Northern Lights. I am not a big traveler, I'm mostly content to enjoy the amazing beauty all around me, but I missed seeing the Northern Lights once when I lived in Boston. I was even out walking that night in 1978, unaccountably restless. I just didn't look up. I read about the rare display of the aurora in Boston in the newspaper the next morning, and ever since, well, it has seemed like unfinished business, somehow, an itch that needed scratching.

I told that story in a sermon a few years ago, and when it came time to celebrate my 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ministry here in this church, somebody remembered and money was raised...such a generous lot of money was raised...that I could spend a month in Fairbanks and William and Kevin could visit and there was even money to purchase the fancy camera lens that one needs to photograph the northern lights.

The sermon was on bucket lists, and the main point of the sermon was that the most important things to have on one's bucket list have nothing to do with rare adventures and exotic places but with relationships, contributions, personal growth, and the like, but I'd mentioned my one exotic itch and remarked that it is good to articulate one's deepest goals and desires and even lay in a few plans. As a part of my sermon research, I had looked into how, exactly one can see the Northern Lights. Turns out it is not so easy. One can increase the likelihood of seeing the northern lights, by being in the Aurora circle at the right time of year, which for reasons I don't understand is the Spring Equinox, but solar storm prediction is an inexact science and actually gives only a few day's warning of potentially good auroras, and those auroras can only be seen in the place you are if the weather is clear. If one really wants to see the Northern Lights, one has to go to the right place and hang out a while. A week is definitely not enough. And if one is going to hang out near the Arctic circle for a month near the Spring equinox, it seemed to me that one should be fluent in the local language and in a big enough town to have some other interesting things to do. So. Fairbanks in March, and a great shot at seeing the Northern Lights more than once... about 15 times, as a matter of fact...and while I did see the lights from the plane flying in to

Fairbanks, I didn't see them again for 10 days, mostly because of bad weather. Staying a month turned out to be a good plan.

Also because to see them you have to get out of town, into the true dark, after 11 pm, when it is dangerously cold out, and mostly through mountains whose roads are a solid sheet of ice, and it's not clear where cell phone service ends and frankly...it took me a couple of weeks to find places I felt comfortable going to under those conditions. For me, seeing the Northern Lights was an exercise in risk-taking, and that was good for me!

The goddess of travel was very good to me, from the cloudy first week which allowed me to explore happily with no anxiety about not seeing the Northern Lights to the kind and generous people I met who told me about their lives and shared their city and loaned me a parka fit for a moon walk and cross country skis which is, by the way, something Fairbanks should be better known for... to the Iditarod which was, at the last minute, moved to Fairbanks, and Denali National Park and the Native American Culture and the Pipeline and what it did for Alaska, and Reindeer, which are domesticated caribou, much prized in the bush for meat ,and in the city for Reindeer sausage. and father Sun himself, who obliged with just the sorts of storms that created, in the end, nights and nights of fabulous Northern Lights, and the experience of joy...several times....as the sky played with color in the silent cold. And perhaps you won't be surprised to hear that the joy came, not just from nature's gift of beauty but from nature's gift of beauty made available by gifts from you: of love and long relationships and holy work done together, all of which were palpable to me on those darkly beautiful nights.

## **The Spirit and the Aurora**

I had already realized before I left, that the quest for the northern lights was going to be a lot like other quests for spiritual or emotional things: for love, for the

presence of God, for inner peace, or for awe or for joy or for community...all those infinitely precious things that we can influence but not control. You can increase the possibility of experiencing these wonderful things, by being in the right place and being ready and hopeful and active, but there are no guarantees. It's not Disneyland, where the show always goes on. You do what you can do and accept what comes. You want to have a significant relationship? You can't buy it off the shelf. No matter what you do, how well you hone your personality, no matter what you say on Match.com, you may find the love of your life or you may not. So...you'd better be enjoying your day job, your volunteer work, your family, your art.

You might meditate forever and not get to the place where you feel the Spirit wafting through your being and the peace which passes understanding becomes yours. So it's good to remind yourself that meditation practice is good for you, that it is very likely to make your life better even if you never find Nirvana.

The northern lights are the same way, and good training for the rest of it. You can quest but there are no guarantees. Even with Aurora cams and the predictions of the Geophysical Institute, the lights come and go in their own sweet way. One of the first nights I went out, I dressed fit for a moon-walk, at 11 pm, drove to a pull out on the road out of town that I had noticed on a skiing trip, and stood with some Japanese tourists while we watched, despite rave predictions from the scientific lot, a very modest display. It was lovely, and then it went away, and then I discovered that my car was stuck in a snow bank, and had to elicit, with signs and smiles, the help of the Japanese tourists for a push. I got out, went home to my bed and breakfast, and crawled out of the car to discover an aurora so bright that it was plainly visible through the city lights. Still a little shaken from being stuck in a snowbank, I didn't have the heart to get back on the highway. I went inside, warmed up, and took some pictures from my bedroom window, and turned in, and, I know now, missed a fabulous night of dancing lights in the countryside.

Seeing the Northern Lights in town is really unusual. You just have to get out of the city lights to see this phenomena. And actually, speaking metaphorically,

getting out of “city lights” is often a requirement for personal growth or spiritual experience. City lights, distractions, responsibility, hubbub...the 10 thousand things that dazzle and distract us from the more subtle parts of our lives...we have to get away sometimes, get some space, settle yourself, get the dazzle of the everyday out of your eyes. That’s one thing that vacations are for, and retreats, and quiet days. A little empty dark is the prelude to wondrous things.

And, you’ve got to take some risks. The risk of wasting your time on no lights, of being cold, of getting stuck, of setting yourself up to view the Northern Lights away from the city lights only to be descended upon by tourists with flash. Of going to unknown places on slippery roads in the pitch dark... you have to take some risks. You have to take the risk of talking to the one you are estranged from, or the one you think you might want to get to know better, or the risk of trying a meditation retreat or the risk of a creating a new routine, breaking an old habit... Life is full of risks, and some pay off and some don’t. I was lucky in Alaska. Most nights I went out were wonderful. It felt risky...and worth the risky. Like love feels risky, and like starting a spiritual discipline feels risky, and setting out on almost any venture. But: Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

The Aurora, like all things, but especially like all subtle, spiritual, emotional things, looks and feels different to different people, with different eyes, different cameras, different attitudes. The naked eye sees mostly cloudlike formations, mostly gray and green. It’s beautiful and magical, but, these vivid pictures I’ve showed you, with pinks and purples and patterns: that’s the aurora through the eye of the camera, 6 to 30 second exposures...beyond the capability of the naked eye. But, after a few nights of going back and forth between naked eye and camera, you start to see differently; you look up in the sky and see not only what the eye sees but what you have learned that the camera sees. It’s a little like how two people with a long and sympathetic relationship begin to see each other; not just the surface person that the world sees, but the person clothed with experiences, emotions, pain, depth, baggage, and love. It seems infuriatingly unrealistic to the observer of only the present moment.

It is the same way with spiritual experiences, which happen in some place within us that has no words, and so they take on new layers when we try to describe them, or when we come across someone else's similar, clumsy description. What's the real thing? It is all real. There is nothing fake about the photographs William took of the Northern Lights...but they captured a slightly different slice of the whole reality of the Northern Lights than my eyes captured.

One of the benefits of belonging to a religious community is that in our participation we are reminded that what we see with our down-to-earth senses is only one slice of the whole reality of our lives, which also encompass spirit, values, love, and affirmation. Participating in a religious community may look like music and potlucks and committee meetings, but the doing of it is a way of going back and forth between the reality before us and the higher and deeper versions of reality that are just as real but not as evident in the dazzle of city lights and daily struggles.

Finally, we need others on our journeys. Once I caught on to how hard it was going to be to see the Northern lights, I asked for help in Fairbanks. I talked to the people at the visitors center, the camera store, the UU Fellowship. I asked about roads and websites and safety. This will probably surprise you, because you know me as a pretty introverted person, but I reached out, way out...that also felt risky, and was also rich. I heard a native American shopkeeper's story of being sent to boarding school, an East Indian woman's experience of an especially wonderful Aurora in the wee hours the night before, an Athabaskan woman's story of how her broken arm was set by wrapping it in birchbark which dries rock hard.

I did a bunch of wonderful things on my sabbatical. Alicia Hawkins and I wrote the third book in our series of books of resources for covenant groups, which we were asked to do after Heart to Heart and Soul to Soul turned out to be best sellers with our denominational press. I was able to support the UU's of Fairbanks during the last month of their search for their first minister. I ate Moose stew, skied the rapidly changing northern forest, and saw two moose. I read 34 books, some of which you'll hear about in future sermons, but about half of which were

Alaska bush murder mysteries which are also an entre into Alaskan culture in style of Tony Hillerman here in Indian country. Great fun! My house and garden are in much better shape and I am ready for my parents to arrive and settle into a new assisted living not far from here in two and a half weeks.

Besides being grateful for the gift from you which sent me to Alaska, not to mention the gift of sabbatical time itself, I am grateful to Angela...and the whole staff...who carried on so capably during my absence, to church leaders and volunteers who kept so much going, and for those of you who supported all those leaders with your presence, your money, your enthusiasm, and your help.

But what I will remember when it comes my turn for assisted living, is mostly the magic and mystery of the Northern Lights. I have to tell you that a 30 day obsession with finding the lights in the sky and watching them dance changed my feeling about the sky....I hope forever. And this, by the way, is how you know that you really were brushed by the spirit or really were in love...it changed you. I returned to New Mexico to notice vividly the way the clouds move, the way the Space Station looks when it crosses the heavens, the way the moon changes the color of the sky...in other words, the way our sky is just as alive in its own way as the sky of Alaska. I came back to where I started, but changed, which is how it is supposed to be, and ready to tackle the next phase of my life: a few more years of ministry in this church, a new role with my family, a new willingness to take risks, and new relationship to the sky, and to Mystery. And so, again, I thank you.

And now, with a little more context around this mystery, here again, are the northern lights.