“Where Are You From?”

a reflection by
Rev. Bill Gupton

Sunday, Feb. 8, 2004
Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
Cincinnati, Ohio

Ah, indeed – there’s no place like home!

In this morning’s second reading, Mary Pipher recounts her experience as a native Nebraskan in New York City, being asked by a rather patronizing stranger, “Where are you from?”

As you might imagine, Pipher’s experience is one I can relate to. After all, let’s face it – I do have just a *hint* of an accent! For most folks – at least those who are meeting me for the first time – it’s my most distinctive feature. What you might not realize is that it hasn’t always been that way.

In fact, for the first 30 or so years of my life, I didn’t really have an accent. At least, not one that stood out. Hardly anyone (with the exception of my sister’s uppity in-laws from Connecticut) ever wondered where I was from – because I was always right at home, in the South. I was born and raised in Tennessee, and after college lived in North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. No one ever questioned whether or not I belonged there. I carried the coin of the realm, every time I spoke. I could shoot the breeze with the good ol’ boys down at the Wal-Mart just as easily as I could argue the relative merits of Wordsworth versus Coleridge with my English professors – it didn’t matter. I blended into the landscape.

But then I moved to Berkeley, California. Toto, I don’t think we’re in Tennessee anymore…

Keep in mind that, while on more than one occasion during my two years in California, it was ***I*** who was tempted to wonder just where they were from, I understood all along the double meaning behind the question I began being routinely asked. On the one hand, in asking where I was from, people were, perhaps unconsciously, noting that I didn’t act, think, or behave like most of the other people in Berkeley. On the other hand, there was often

a strong undertone of condescension in their inquiry – much like the New Yorker asking Mary Pipher about Nebraska.

And *that*, more than the observation that I was a cultural outsider, is what got my goat. But it also got me to thinking about the true meaning of "home."

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of adulthood is coming to terms with our roots. I suspect that, among a demographic segment as prone to rebelliousness as Unitarian Universalists, this is particularly true. But regardless of one's religion, to be human is, in one way or another, to seek to separate ourselves from our upbringing. It's a natural, and healthy, part of the individuation process.

Yet at some point in our maturing, we just as naturally come to seek a *reconnection* with our roots. As the Tao Te Ching tells us: "Realize where you come from. This is the essence of wisdom."

For me, it took moving to California, where I must admit I often felt like the main character in Robert Heinlein's "Stranger in a Strange Land," to fully own my Southern heritage. And, ironically, it wasn't until I was able to do that – and in the process work through my own ambivalence about who I was, and where I was from – that I could finally feel "at home" <u>anywhere</u> ... which I now do, very much so, right here in Ohio.

I want to share with you a bit of that journey, because I believe you can't know where you might <u>go</u> with someone – including your minister – unless you understand where they're coming from.

As most of you know, I grew up in a small town in the hills of East Tennessee, in the 1960s. As a boy, I attended the Methodist church, went to school, and for the most part stayed out of trouble. With a mixture of fascination and horror, I watched – from a distance, on our tiny black-and-white television – as the social and political fabric of America was slowly tearing apart. I didn't understand the changes that were going on somewhere "out there," all those miles away – but I, too, felt myself changing. As I reached my adolescent years, I became more and more disaffected with my small-town life.

Phyllis Tickle could have been speaking for me when she wrote, in her autobiography "Notes from the Hill Country," "It was not, I think, that I grew up assuming that it was impossible to be free in a world controlled by the fundamentalists. It was rather that in the dark mountain days of my early years, sheer isolation forced conformity. We all became identical by default, and there was no blame to be placed for our condition."

Yet I was one of the lucky ones. I went off to the "big city" – Knoxville, that is – to go to college, and later moved to the <u>real</u> big city –

Atlanta. I was free at last. Free of my small-town, stifling upbringing. Free of my parents, my family, and the roots that, I felt, were holding me *way* too close.

And so, I embarked on a long and winding road whose only requirement was that it lead *away* from my home. How ironic, then, that it was next to the Pacific Ocean that I finally turned my heart back toward the Southland I had left so far behind.

Let me tell you the story of that change of heart:

During seminary, I was attending a Unitarian Universalist Leadership School just north of San Francisco. In the course of that week-long program, I was assigned to a three-person worship team that was instructed to plan a service around the theme of "diversity." You could have cut the tension in the room with a knife when the three of us first met.

I have to hand it to our instructor – he was brilliant. We spun our wheels for a while until one of my colleagues blurted out: "I wonder why *we* were chosen to lead this particular service, anyway?"

That cut the tension, and got us to thinking – and talking. At last it occurred to us that we <u>ourselves</u> represented perhaps the only evident diversity within this upper-middle class, lilly-white group of Unitarian Universalists – and it all centered around *where we were from*. You see, one of us was British, one was from New Jersey, and one was from the South.

As the light bulbs began going on in our heads, we became more animated, and began sharing our feelings about the "home" each of us had left behind in order to pursue our dreams. We talked about our hometowns, about our parents, our upbringings. About our prejudices and preconceptions about the places represented by the others in the group. About the very different cultures we had, we thought, put behind us – only to discover that those cultures were an undeniable part of who we had become.

The sharing was powerful, and the insights long-lasting. As we at last conducted our worship service, and afterward – as we processed our experience with the larger group – I found that, perhaps for the first time, I was able to truly claim with pride both my small-town Southern roots, <u>and</u> my own unique individuality. Up until that week, I had felt the two were mutually exclusive – that I had to choose between them. And choose I had.

For far too long – both when it was developmentally appropriate, and long after – I had chosen to identify myself with a well-cultivated and meticulously maintained *individuality*. (Perhaps this is why I had become a UU in the first place!) But at any rate, that emphasis on self, on my own atomistic uniqueness, had come at a steep price – the cost of turning my back on where I was from, and thus, of denying an important part of who I

am. In the process of crafting and presenting that worship service, I had finally begun to integrate both aspects of myself into a more complete, and thus more genuine, human being.

Since that week at Leadership School, answering the question "Where are you from?" has been much easier for me. I'm from Tennessee… and, if you'd like to get to know me better, I'm a unique person, shaped in many ways by where I'm from – but unique nonetheless.

Each of you, too, is from somewhere. I know that Bari Garner-Holman identifies with Kansas, and Cindy Berryman-Fink with New England. There's an ease, a familiarity, a *comfort* we feel when we return to the soil we come from. Heck, even Eastsiders and Westsiders know what I mean. It's as if each of us were born with a tiny homing beacon implanted somewhere in our brain.

Recently, I read a book that sheds some light on this phenomenon. Winifred Gallagher has compiled years of scientific research – as well as some distinctly unscientific folklore – into a book titled "The Power of Place." In it, she writes, "Throughout history, people of all cultures have assumed that environment influences behavior. Now, modern science is confirming that our actions, thoughts and feelings are indeed shaped not just by our genes or neurochemistry, our history or relationships, but also by our *surroundings*. The cutting edge of scientific inquiry has begun tearing away conceptual barriers between actions and the contexts in which they occur."

"The Power of Place" includes the latest theories on why some people are "mountain people" and others are "ocean people," why some are naturally drawn to the remote wilderness of Montana, and others migrate to New York or London. The reasons – which include not only formative childhood experiences, but also such esoteric data as underground techtonics and electromagnetic fields, levels of oxygen in the air and minutely differing circulatory systems – the reasons we feel the "power of place" so deep in our bones are – perhaps, less important than the fact that these differences among people, often thought to be the stuff of legend, are very much real.

The "power of place" impacts the way we perceive things, the way we speak, the way we interact. It often, though subconsciously, even influences where we choose to live. Have you ever observed a conversation between a "mountain person" and an "ocean person"? It's sort of like a conversation between a "cat person" and a "dog person" – yes, they're both speaking English, but at some basic level, they don't share the same worldview. It was kind of like that with me in California.

Gallagher's book has given me some insights into my feelings about Cincinnati as well. Even before you chose me as your minister, I remember

an almost overwhelming sense of coming home the first time I drove around the eastern suburbs. The curving, two-lane roads, winding through stands of tall, densely packed trees – and, most of all, the hills – gave me a strange sense of euphoria; I could literally feel my body respond in a paradoxical mixture of elation and relaxation. It was as if I had slipped my hand into a comfortable, well-worn glove. I have lived in Tulsa, and in other (for me) eerily flat places such as Mary Pipher describes in her passage about Nebraska – but I have never felt *at home* in those places. Yet the topography of this part of Cincinnati is almost identical to that where I was born – and I instantly felt at ease.

Yes, there are "mountain people," and "ocean people" – and there are also "hill people." Here, in the gently curving hills of Cincinnati, I have found a new home – one so familiar that it almost seems as if I have lived here all my life. And you know what – though I am still, sometimes, asked where I'm from – it doesn't happen nearly as much anymore.

Except, of course, when I travel to places like Boston. When a clerk in a store during General Assembly last year asked me the inevitable "Where are you from?" I replied, almost without thinking, "Do you mean, where is my *accent* from, or where is my *home*?" The answer to those two questions is now different.

I am from Tennessee, and part of my heart and soul will always reside there – like the whorls of fingerprints, like fossils the sea has left behind.

But I am making a new home, here, in Cincinnati. With each passing day, this little piece of the earth is becoming more and more a part of who I am, a part of my very identity, in a way the plains of Oklahoma or the California coast never did. There's something very beautiful in that for me – and, as Mary Pipher said, it's not that I've begun to think of this place as home because of its beauty – rather, I have begun to think of it as beautiful, because it is my home.

Blessed be – namaste – and amen.