

THE UPLAND PATH

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Phillip Hewett

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The upland path. I take those words from a long poem by Robert Bridges, whose work is, I think, little read nowadays, though he had for some years been England's poet laureate at the time of his death in 1930. I find myself particularly drawn to what he said because that poem was published on his 85th birthday and I have just celebrated my 86th, so I can share his perspective when he wrote:

'Twas late in my long journey, when I had [climbed] to where the path was narrowing and the company few, a glow of childlike wonder enthral'd me, as if my sense had come to a new birth purified, my mind enrapt re-awakening to a fresh initiation of life; with like surprise of joy as any man may know who rambling wide hath turn'd, resting on some hilltop to view the plain he has left, and sees it now outspread mapp'd at his feet, a landscape so by beauty estranged he scarce will ken familiar haunts, nor his own home, maybe, where far it lies, small as a faded thought.

Thus, from that 'upland path', he looked back and down over the route he had followed through life to arrive where he now was, and as I read his words I immediately jumped beyond the metaphor to my own quite literal memories of an upland path. One such memory in particular stood out, and I would like to share it with you now.

Forty-four years ago last July a little group of Unitarians might have been seen making their way down a still snow-covered slope high up on the west side of Howe Sound. We were all carrying heavy packs. It was raining steadily, as it had been doing since the previous afternoon. None of us had dry feet and few of us had dry backs, and we still had a long distance to cover down to the trailhead. You might suppose that under those circumstances we would have been pretty miserable, but no – that was far from being so. We were in excellent spirits. The mountain air was cool and clean and sweet. In imperceptible ways we had absorbed something from our surroundings that had swept from our souls the sordidness that so often goes with what we are

pleased to call our civilization.

The previous day we had stood on the summit of Mount Sedgwick, well over two thousand metres above the sea, and had gazed out over a marvellous and awe-inspiring scene. Below us, extending more than half-way up the mountain, lay a blanket of cloud that was already dispensing liquid refreshment to the unfortunates who had stayed at home. Protruding above that cloud stood peak after peak, like so many islands. Except to the north, where the appropriately-named jagged pinnacles of the Tantalus Range blocked our view, we could see for vast distances in every direction.

It was tempting to spend more time up there than we had planned, but we knew that the narrow ridge by which we had made the last part of the climb would soon be enveloped in the obviously rising cloud. It would be foolhardy to go down that ridge, with its snow cornices overhanging a sheer precipice, without a clear view of where we were going. But those moments on the peak made the whole expedition well worth while -- though I should add that few of us, I'm sure, would have made the climb had we supposed that we would trade three days of negative experiences for half an hour of richly positive ones. No – the other moments all had their positive components too, even the moments of hazard and spills when one or two of us came close to the possibility of serious injury. But to explain all those positive components to those who were not there is an almost impossible assignment. I can only say, as F. S. Smythe said in a long-treasured book, *The Spirit of the Hills*, that words are a sorry substitute for first-hand experience, and the experience itself, in common with all deep experiences we can describe as religious, stands in no need of vindication. As he put it: 'Such a question as, "Why do you climb mountains?" is only answerable in terms of concrete experience and the inexpressible thoughts that permeate such experience; and when that experience is transcendental and made up of many parts, just as white light is made up of many colours, the task of translating into words more than a tithe of its beauty becomes impossible.'

The poets have tried. William Blake, who never climbed a mountain in his life, somehow understood, when he wrote:

Great things are done when men and mountains meet;

This is not done by jostling in the street.

Shelley, who saw more of mountains than Blake did, expressed his response as he stood below and gazed up at Mont Blanc:

Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood
By all, but which the wise, and great, and good
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel....
The secret strength of things
Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
Of Heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind's imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy?

'The human mind's imaginings' – yes, those imaginings ensure that we don't actually have to be in the presence of such a stimulus. I have often said that a church service is not designed to give us an immediate firsthand religious experience, but rather to stir our imaginings to a vivid recollection and reliving of such experiences wherever and whenever they may have been ours. Let me quote F. S. Smythe again: 'The hills endure in memory. They bring a bright and sudden colour to the drab slate of doubt and discontent; they shine in a single illuminating ray through the involved dogmas – religious, political and psychological – with which we are apt to surround the real issues of life.'

Yes, that ray is a great dissolver of dogmas. Dogmas are produced within walls of human construction, not out on mountain or forest or ocean. But these do provide a great setting for authentic non-dogmatic religious thinking. James Martineau, who made such an outstanding contribution to the developing Unitarian tradition, was in the habit of exploring basic religious issues with his colleagues as they climbed the hills together – believing, I suppose, that this was a more likely setting in which to arrive at meaningful conclusions than the study or the lecture-hall.

If we make mythology, story, a focus of our religious explorations, rather than dogma, see how the people of so many lands and ages have made the mountains the home of their gods. In Hindu

and Buddhist mythology there is the remote and sacred Mount Kailas in Tibet, said to be the seat of the gods and totally out of bounds to all humans, though some fortunate few who are prepared to endure all the hardships to arrive at its foot may make a complete circuit with reverence at that level. The Greeks likewise placed their gods on Mount Olympus. Our own local mountains were seen in the same way as the sacred abode of gods and spirits, sometimes so sacred that no one was allowed to climb them. I well remember the feeling I had when I ventured to climb a mountain in New Zealand similarly *tapu* to the Maori people. I had the most extraordinary feeling of awe in its upper reaches. All around the world the story is the same. Another of my most treasured books is the magnificently illustrated one called *Sacred Mountains of the World*. Its author, Edwin Bernbaum, writes: 'As the highest and most dramatic features of the natural landscape, mountains have an extraordinary power to evoke the sacred.'

I think too of that remarkable story from the Bible, the story of Moses on Mount Sinai. How much of that story is factual and how much is fabulous we will never know, but on the face of it, for a man of the age I am now to tackle a mountain considerably higher than Sedgwick was no mean feat, and he was said to have done it not once but several times. However, the real point is not that he went up there, but that his experience on the summit was such that he could only interpret it as a direct encounter with -- -- well, the conventional answer when Christians tell the story is, with GOD. Jews are more reticent, and after all, the story is from their Scripture. Orthodox Jews would never dare to utter that word; in fact, even when they venture to write it, they spell it G—D. The reality was too sacred to be named. Earlier in the story, Moses had asked this mysterious presence: 'What is your name?' and received the cryptic answer 'I AM WHO I AM'. Later Jews substituted a strange combination of letters when they wanted to make this reference, and most English translations have rendered it as 'the Lord'. Personally, I think it would be truer to the original intention to translate it as 'the Ineffable One', to mark the fact that, as Tennyson put it, 'thou canst not prove the Nameless'. Even poetic language fails here, let alone dogma. Moses on Sinai had an experience of the Ineffable One. Revelation, insight, imagination, intuition – call it what you will: this is at the heart of religion as experienced not only by him, but also by the climbers I mentioned earlier.

Another expression repeatedly used in the Bible is 'the Most High' – for instance in the *Book of Acts* it is written: 'the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands; as the

prophet says, “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool”.’ (*Acts*, 7:48). None the less, houses have been made with human hands for the worship of the Most High in the nearest places to the heavens that could be reached by climbing a mountain. I have been in Buddhist shrines on mountains in Japan and Korea. I have climbed hills overlooking Transylvanian villages to reach Unitarian churches with a commanding view. I have looked down from the English cathedrals at Ely and Lincoln, crowning the summits of the only hills for a great distance around. In days of old, both in Mesopotamia and in Mexico, people felt so strongly that this was the only appropriate site for a temple that they went to the immense labour of building artificial hills for this purpose where there were no natural ones.

In ancient Israel the religious leaders found an easier way of doing the same thing. Although the land had originally been dotted with hilltop shrines or 'high places', these had been condemned by the prophets as contaminated by heathen worship, so they could not be used any more, officially at any rate. And there were no really lofty peaks like Olympus or Sinai, or even the mountains of neighbouring Lebanon. All this notwithstanding, ancient Hebrew writers used to argue in the teeth of all the evidence that the Temple hill in Jerusalem was the highest place on earth. If they were cornered in argument about this, they might concede that the hill itself was not uniquely high in this way, but if you added in the height of the Temple, it was – or, if the rational sceptics were still not convinced, they fell back to the position that this might not be so at the present time, but the Most High would most certainly make it so when the right time came. So Isaiah wrote: 'It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Ineffable One shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills.' (*Isaiah*, 2:2) For added emphasis, exactly the same words appear in the book of the prophet Micah (*Micah*, 4:1); presumably both prophets were drawing upon a vision widely shared in their times.

Why did they feel this to be so important? To ask that is to ask why mountains are so universally felt to have a sacred significance, why there is this universal urge to come up higher. In this morning's reading we heard how Confucius looked down and felt the smallness of the world below. Isn't that a part of the answer? The higher you climb, the further you can see, and moreover, you get a better perspective on things. Things that seemed to tower over us menacingly while we were jostling in the street now look trivial – in fact some of them are so

small that we can't see them at all.

Let's come back down now to where we are at present. We don't have to pretend that the place where we gather for worship is actually on a mountain-top, but none the less, if that is not literally true, it can be true in a figurative sense. Surely it is significant that we speak of seeking the higher things in life and rising above what is degrading – a word that literally means to be pulled down. We're always aware of the forces working to degrade us, pull us down, whether psychologically, into the mists of depression, or morally, into the quagmires of depravity. Climbing a mountain is always a pitting of will and effort against the pull of gravity. It's not easy. But then, no responsible person has ever claimed that attainment is easy, either in climbing a mountain or in spiritual ascent. In both situations, though, we are given immense support from the comrades of the way who are with us to reinforce our determination and endeavour. For us in the here and now, this means the congregation, the religious community. And of course we are also supported by the frequent upward glance towards the beckoning summit and the feeling that, yes, we have made progress towards it.

But here the analogy between physical climbing and spiritual aspiration begins to break down. On a climb you can at length reach the summit, as our little group did on Sedgwick. In the spiritual ascent, there is always further. If you are familiar with Dante's great poem, you will remember that the pilgrim, having laboured up the slopes of the mountain of Purgatory and reached the earthly paradise at its peak, still has to continue the ascent into outer space, the realm of the sun and the stars, the empyrean.

But if you go back to the earlier part of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, there's another important feature that we can't ignore. Before he starts to climb, he goes down, deeper and deeper and deeper in the opposite direction. It's not without significance that the Latin word *altus* can mean either high or deep, and both these meanings are frequently used in religion, in psychology, and even in ecology. We speak of going deeper in our spiritual quest or in psychological probings; there is a whole school of thinking called Deep Ecology.

In your own journey you can use whichever of these directions seems to offer the best prospects for progress. You are invigorated by the freshness of the upper air, or you seek to plumb the calm depths beneath all the froth and bubble of the surface. For my part, I'm a poor and clumsy

swimmer and not at all a diver, so I have no credentials to speak much about the depths, though I acknowledge that the call to go deeper may resonate more to some people than the call to come up higher.

But in either case the physical activity will help, as well as the metaphorical thinking. If we bring this back to the quest that gathers us here as a religious community, then what we are really dealing with is *in here* rather than *up there*. We are seeking personal growth towards what Christians have called transfiguration and Buddhists have called enlightenment. But in neither religion is that the end of the story.

Let's look again at the mountain. What goes up must come down. We can't stay up there. We return, as Moses returned from the mountain-top or the Buddhist Bodhisattva returns to the everyday world. But when we return we are not the same persons as we were when we set out. The ancient story tells us that when Moses came down from the mountain the skin of his face shone (*Exodus* 34:29). Don't interpret that as meaning he was sunburned; the learned commentators say it was a reflection of the divine glory, and the Biblical narrative itself says the people were afraid to come near him. He was a changed man. He had gained a new perspective on life. He also knew he had been given new instructions; according to the account, the Ineffable One told him as he prepared to go back down from the mountain-top: 'see that you work to the pattern shown you on the mountain'.

In the end, perhaps that word 'pattern' sums it up. What has been gained from the mountain-top experience is the unfolding of a pattern, whether looking down at the patchwork landscape below, or considering the form our everyday living is to take, either individually or together. In other words, the final test comes in the field of personal behaviour and social action. Each demands a pattern, and the peak experience can enable us to see and to follow that pattern.

The mount for vision; but below
The paths we follow daily go,
And loftier living now shall own
The pattern on the mountain shown.

Phillip Hewett