

I recently got a friend request from my son on Facebook. He's out in Los Angeles and was creating a new professional page for his work as a sound engineer. I was touched that he would invite me to look at it. But as I was reading through his bio page I noticed he put down Estes Park, Colorado as his hometown. That intrigued me. He actually was born in Oberlin, Ohio and lived most of his growing up years in Avon, Ohio. Both nice but not particularly compelling places to be from.

Our family had lived in Estes Park from 1994 to 1998 – roughly from when he was 11 to 15 – and then we had moved back to Avon, Ohio again. But for some reason, he claimed that as hometown. As I thought about it, it did make sense. I feel like those brief four years in Colorado did have an outsized impact on how my children saw themselves – on how they understood themselves in relation to the rest of the world.

We owned a small mom & pop restaurant called the Mountain Home Café, which meant that our kids spent a LOT of their time at the café with us. Nick washed dishes and helped clean, eventually waiting a few tables. Genny, my middle daughter helped run the register & roll silverware & Carrie – the youngest, occupied herself with writing stories on napkins and creating art sculptures from “to go” containers.

In the process, they met people from all over the world. Estes Park is a destination location – folks like the Dali Lama & the prince & princesses of Japan, along with Jim Carey & Rebecca De Mornay all passed by our front doors even if they didn't quite stop in for a bite to eat.

We had wait staff from all over the globe – from Scotland, Morocco, Denmark, Germany – we even had a young couple from Ireland live in our camper in the backyard one summer because they couldn't find a place to live. My kids hobnobbed with travelers, searchers, rock climbers & folks who chose to get out and see the world. I believe this gave them a wide vision of what might be possible. Each of them has traveled around the world, and ended up living far from Avon, Ohio – while most of their friends from school still live within 50 miles of home.

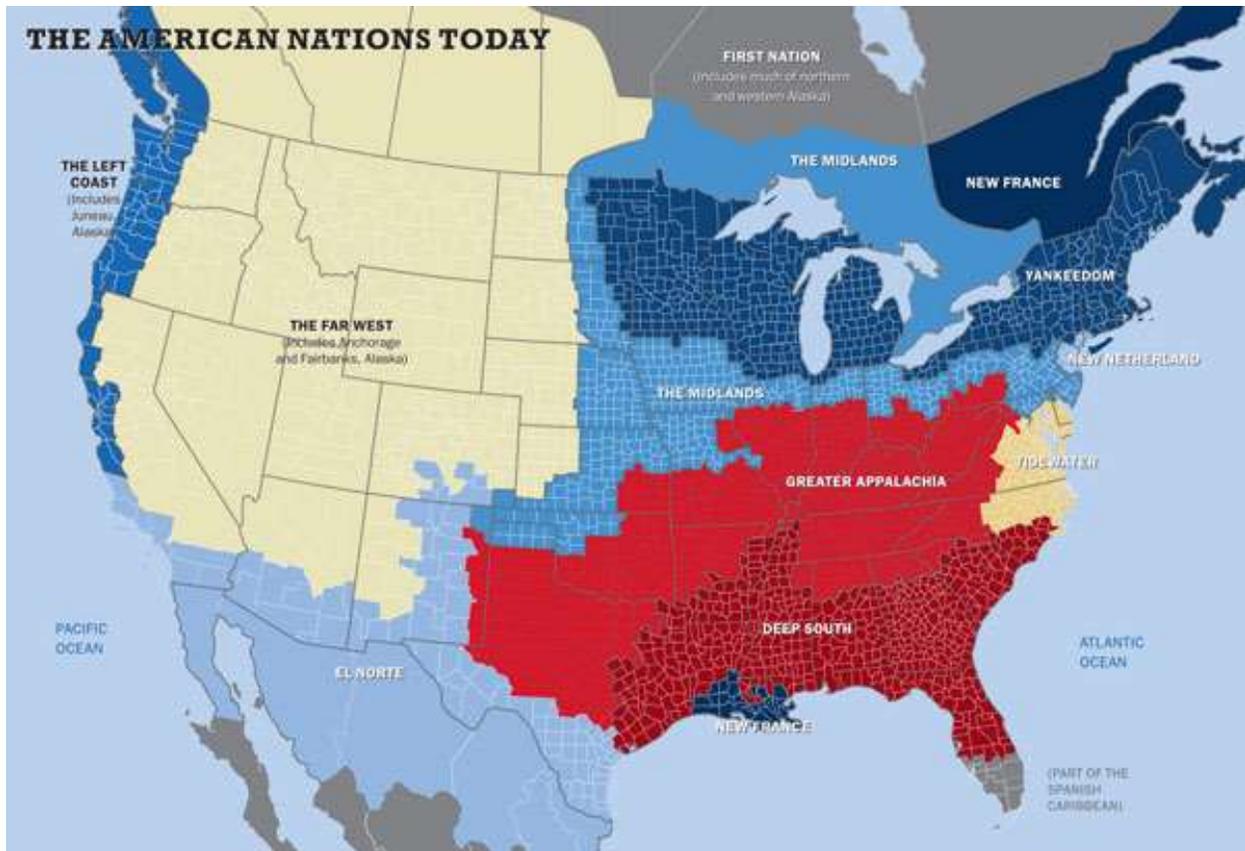
Estes Park, is an accurate descriptor of my son's hometown; the place which imprinted on him a way of looking at the world; a way of being that shaped and continues to shape the choices he makes in life.

Where do you come from? We can answer that question geographically, socially, emotionally, spiritually. How do we answer that question?

Geographically, our country is split into specific regions – but it'S also split into some pretty distinct ideological divisions. We may at first think of the north and the south, or the breadbasket, or the coasts and the flyover space in between (although we might all take umbrage at that one!)

But Colin Woodard, author of the book “American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America” says that we are more divided, and different, than we might have imagined.

As the title of his book suggests, he offers a compelling argument that North America is actually a collection of 11 different cultural groups.



And those differences arise mainly from the historical ancestry of the folks who first settled each region.

He posits that “There’s never been an America, but rather several Americas—each a distinct nation.” In an article in Tufts magazine called ‘Up in Arms’ he talks about the various regions approach to violence and says that “There are eleven nations today. Each looks at violence, as well as everything else, in its own way.”

Because America is such a large geographical area, as settlers came over from the various cultural and geographic regions of Europe they tended to remain isolated from each other and develop deeper patterns of behaviors and culture rather than merging in the melting pot story we’re familiar with.

Woodard writes:

“Our continent’s famed mobility has been reinforcing, not dissolving, regional differences, as people increasingly sort themselves into like-minded communities... Even waves of immigrants did not fundamentally alter these nations, because the children and grandchildren of immigrants assimilated into whichever culture surrounded them”

Where we come from colors the way we see & experience the world. We feel comfortable with folks who see the world the way we do.

I can attest to this first hand, having just lived in Chattanooga for two years; it is a beautiful area with abundant natural resources and a lovely temperate climate but - I never felt like it could be my home.

While I found many southerners who were thoughtful and liberal in their attitudes, the zeitgeist of the area persuaded me that I was not a southern girl and I was really happy to be coming “home” to Chicago.

Chicago and Lorain, Ohio, my hometown, are both part of the cultural nation that Woodard names Yankeedom. Folks in this region believe in the power of community to help individuals and solve problems – we come out of the New England town square experience of governance and see that as a healthy and respected symbol of egalitarian access to power. At some level we have trusted that government does represent the best interests of the people.

This is the exact opposite of people who settled in what he names Greater Appalachia: Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish and English immigrants who mistrusted the ruling classes and prized individuality and self-sufficiency over all else. This distrust of authority figures – even democratically elected ones – and prioritizes the kind of stand your ground and vigilante justice that appall many northerners.

Woodard makes the caveat that, of course, each region has a range of belief systems and cultural mindsets, but asserts that there is an overarching hegemony which defines each area. I felt uncomfortable in the south, even as I enjoyed my new friends, the beautiful mountains and the recreational opportunities of the area. At some deeper level it didn't feel right.

Where we come from says a lot about us. But not just geographically. Where we come from socially is also very telling. I was born into a generational crossover from working to middle class – with the added confusion that my father's profession, politician, had us hobnobbing with a social class yet another step above us.

We were hard working do-it-yourselfers, lived month to month, and walked places when we only had one car but visited & socialized with folks who had yachts, – gasp, color TVs - and were power brokers for the larger community. My dad went so far in his career as to serve as a State Senator and sit on the Governors cabinet as Director of the Lottery in the late 80's but he came from a family of roofers. And my mom's mom worked full time up until her 70's and lived in public housing for a large portion of her life.

We were middle class, but just barely. What does this tell you about me? What I value? Where my priorities were with my own children. For my siblings and me it was suggested that we go to college – but we had to figure out how to get there on our own. For my kids – there was no question. They were going to college. The middle class value of education had had time to firm up and take hold.

Where do we come from? What do we value? I'm talking about roots, about our past and our identities today because we are beginning a relationship of ministry. We're just getting to know one another and one of the first things you ask in that process is where did you come from?

What perspective do you bring? What is your vision?

Remember those old sitcoms that used the different perspectives trope to play the same incident over and over again with comical results? Each time the story was told it was radically different; the person telling the story had a completely different version of events than the other folks present. Exaggerated for comic effect – but our perspectives do color our stories.

This is why we try to understand another's stand point – in order to approach something in a similar vein. In order to find connection and common ground.

Here in church an important place that we come from is our spiritual heritage. Saying “I’m a former Catholic or a cradle UU” mean vastly different things. Those statements reveal different experiences, & expectations. They can show a preference for ritual or a sense of exploration; a predilection for rebellion or a love of learning. It’s important to discover past beginnings to find the common ground upon which to build a future. There are many ways to do this, but the best is simply by being in conversation.

While I was serving a chaplain residency at Elmhurst Hospital we had a favorite practice that we did each week called ‘Story Theology.’ With story theology you took an ordinary story – not a big important one, just one that came up in the moment, and shared it with your group. Then you took the story apart and looked at it from a variety of different lenses. First we’d look at the feeling the story brought up. Was it happy? Sad? Nostalgic? Was there any tension or anxiety in the story?

Then the group members would think up similar experiences – or feeling experiences - that they had.

I once told a story about getting lost while driving to a concert while in high school. A large group – I think maybe 7 girls - of us had gone in my parent’s little Ford Maverick – we’d driven over an hour and half for some rock concert – I can’t even remember who we saw now. After the concert ended, as we walked back to the car two very cute young men asked for a ride home & we said ok. Now 9 people scrunched in a little car. An hour and half from home – and they lived in the opposite direction of Lorain.

But on we went. Into the night, before cell phones or GPS. Eventually we deposited the boys – somewhere – got back on the road, and about 3 hours later I finally made it home.

My group and I discussed why had that story come up? What was the deeper meaning to be found?

It came out that even though we got home really, really late – and I was the only one still struggling mightily to stay awake the last bit of the drive, my folks never said called me on it. And even though we had gotten really lost – I never felt that worried. I knew we’d make it home eventually.

The story revealed to me that I’d both felt on my own for a very long time, and that I trusted that I had a decent sense of direction in my life. I trusted that I would get where I needed to go. This was the gift of story theology – it tells you things that you didn’t know, you know.

It’s a very helpful tool in sitting with people in the role of chaplain – listening to the surface stories people tell and then asking questions that bring out deeper concerns, reflections, or affirmations. Getting in touch with our past, through stories and memories, helps us understand the deeper truth of a moment and ground us to make good choices for the future. You have to know who you really are – and where you’ve been – in order to plan a new journey.

We are just getting to know each other now, just getting to figure out what our deepest hopes and aspirations are – figuring out what solid ground is upon which to build a healthy and vibrant future. Authenticity is incredibly important to me – in my relationships with family, with friends, and with my faith community. The deepest and best relationships are with those folks who really see us, warts and all, and love us all the more for it.

These next few months are going to be a time of opening, of sharing, of stretching and of examining what it means to be church together. Where do you come from?

I've researching the history of the church to find out exactly that - and I inadvertently stumbled upon a blog called UU Essentials. It has wonderful articles covering the founder William Channing Gannett and the history of the church itself. Turns out they were written by... Ed Searl. How great is that?

And Al Fisher sent me a sermon written in 1954 which gave an overview of the history of the church – very helpful. Plus I was gifted with two surveys and many conversations with your search committee. All trying to help me understand your background – trying to convey your viewpoint and wrap my head around where you have come from.

The Unitarian Church of Hinsdale came out of the Unity movement of the late 19th century – although the first church building on this lot housed a Universalist congregation. Founded by William Channing Gannett, it was a missional church which grew out of opposition to the conservative status quo patriarchy of Boston AUA. The Unity men, as they were known, were in sympathy with the freedom-spouting, rebellious Transcendentalists of that day.

Gannett, although a godson of William Emory Channing in Boston - center of all things Unitarian – was also a man willing to head out to the wild west (yes, Illinois was the wild west at that point) and revision a faith tradition that he loved. But Gannett was also a person who believed in the Unity of all people. The Unity Men, led by Jenkin Lloyd Jones, populated the western edge of civilization and formed the Western Conference of Unitarians.

They were forward thinkers and included people like Horace Greeley – “Go West Young Man.” People who were trying to shed restrictive conventions and live authentic and innovative lives. Jones encouraged women in ministry long before it was even thinkable in other denominations and he preached the dedication sermon here in 1887. I find all of this fascinating and have to warn you that we'll be looking deeper at the history of this congregation. At the places it's been –and the people it grew out of in order to try and get a sense of where we want to go next.

Personally I am humbled to be following in the footsteps of William Channing Gannett & Jenkin Lloyd Jones – and I also feel like I'm coming home. My own theology is deeply rooted in finding unity amidst the chaos and conflict, in pushing the boundaries of what is to find what might be.

Our first reading today – *Things Commonly Believe Among Us* – speaks to my impulse to both honor our real and important differences, but look beyond those differences to find the commonalities which make us strong and whole and ready to create a new world of peace and justice for all. Colin Woodard's observation that we find the places which we can feel at home rings true but there is also another layer to that truth. We may be 11 different nations but we share one North American continent – And we may be many different countries and cultures and perspectives, but we all share one small blue planet.

This is the paradox that I live into and celebrate – unity in diversity and peace within the abundant and generous chaos of life. I found my way to the Unitarian Church of Hinsdale because this is a place where you can stand outside the conventional, where you can seek an authentic relationship with the world and the people around you.

But I also found my way here because we begin from the same place; we begin – we come from – the hope that our lives can make a difference, the trust in the Unity of all things and beings, and that faith that we are all in this together. Amen & blessed be.