



Driving to Worship Through the Back Roads of Rural East Tennessee

by Herb Nachman, Member of the Steering Committee of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church

It's Sunday morning, and I've decided to drive the back roads to a worship service. I enjoy the mountain views, the whitewater streams, the deep forests, and the vast rolling pastures where farm animals graze and loll under shade trees. While I encounter much beauty on my journey, I also note an abundance of need.

I am on my way to one of two monthly services offered by our fledgling UU Congregation located in Maryville, Tennessee, the seat of Blount County, about 30 miles south of Knoxville. We are a growing satellite of the larger Tennessee Valley U/U Church in Knoxville. And while we have neither a minister nor a meeting place to call our own, we have found a community hungry for a liberal religious voice. In less than two years we have grown from five to almost 100 members. Our services are conducted by lay speakers or guest ministers, and once more than 200 people attended!

Still driving, I pass quaint old farmhouses, with thin animals enclosed by broken fences. An elderly woman sits in a rocker on the porch of a house badly in need of paint. I wonder what our UU community might do for her? I pass a school with a solitary swing standing idle in the playground and a small sign in front that reads "Jesus Saves." Several bony stray dogs wander about. I remind myself that there is no animal control here. I pass a little white clapboard country church where a cross stands atop the roof and below it a cluster of small white crosses guards the entrance. The message is clear and I wonder how my pro-choice views might be received here. I pull up behind a vintage pickup truck plastered with faded bumper stickers proclaiming conservative slogans.

At last I am parked in front of the Senior Center, which we rent two Sunday mornings each month. I go in, filled with pride for what we have accomplished, but with some concerns for the challenges that lie

ahead. There is much work to be done. Yet, I am greeted warmly and there are hugs. It is good to feel free and to find warmth in this safe place.

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