Confessions of a Country Bumpkin
Sermon by Raz Mason, given at Wy’East UU, October 16, 2011

This sermon was born out of a triangle of three events that wove themselves into my mind like a meaningful puzzle. 

Part 1) officiating at a wedding. Part 2) Hearing a familiar old song on the Sunday Morning Country Oldies Show. 
Part 3) Reading in a book about a woman who received the spiritual message, “Simplify, Simplify.”

Part 1 begins in a little 5-acre farm near Canby. The bride and groom stood between two tall oak trees, near the river. In front of them family and loved ones sat on hay bales covered with blankets. The bride is a Unitarian Universalist, and elected something new to both of us: a flower ceremony within the service. Children were called up to the front, where they took flowers from buckets and distributed them to everyone present. Then, as we all sang a lovely refrain over and over, each participant came up and placed their flower in a basket before the bride and groom, smiling and looking in the eyes of whomever they knew best, the bride or groom. The last to come up were a father and his young son, who was just at the stage of toddling precariously forward,
holding onto his father’s hand.
He was wearing a brown and white striped onesy, and had a long-stemmed red dahlia in his hand. It swayed back and forth, in time with his lurching steps.

If you had asked me to guess beforehand the most poignant moment of the wedding service, I would not have guessed this moment, but it turned out to be.
As the little boy and his father got to the front, it was time to surrender the flower. But the toddler wasn’t so sure that was a good idea.

It took a few seconds for father and son to navigate bending over and letting go. There was an older woman, a family member, sitting near the front. I noticed with surprise that she was crying as she watched this drama. Not just crying - virtually weeping. “Why?” I thought. I don’t know of course, but maybe she was looking back in time, to when the adult now being married was just as small. Perhaps she was seeing the cycle of the generations playing out under the trees. And the poignancy - the immensity of it all - overwhelmed her.

I found her weeping a gift, an insight into how much such ceremonies can touch those present.

As you look back, do any major life ceremonies come to mind that really moved you? Commitment ceremonies and weddings,
funerals, memorial services? Coming of Age, adoption, or naming ceremonies? Even burying a pet in the backyard? What were the feelings that came? Maybe that sense of being in the presence of something big –that links us to the larger human family, even the cosmic circle of life?

**Part 2:** I adore country music. The love affair started in the 70’s (dating myself), when, as a child, I lived for a few years in Hermiston, OR. Does anyone know Hermiston? It’s a small little town in the dry, eastern part of the state, famous for its watermelons and potatoes. Wheat fields and sagebrush plains ran on for miles. Rural. Listening to KOHU, *the voice of Hermiston*, one of the songs I came to know was Cal Smith’s “Country Bumpkin.” It’s the life story of woman. Here are selections from the first and last verses:

*He walked into the bar and parked his lanky frame upon a tall barstool*  
*And with a long soft Southern drawl said*  
*"I'll just have a glass of anything that's cool"*  
*A barroom girl with hard and knowing eyes slowly looked him up and down*  
*And she thought "I wonder how on earth*  
*That country bumpkin found his way to town"*

And the last verse:
Forty years of hard work later in a simple, quiet and peaceful country place
The heavy hand of time had not erased
The raptured wonder from the woman's face
She was lying on her deathbed knowing fully well her race was nearly run
But she softly smiled and looked into the sad eyes of her husband and her son

And she said "So long, country bumpkin" ... “See you later, country bumpkin.”

Now, country music has a reputation for some over-the-top lyrics.
Still, I always tear up when I hear that song,
as I did the day after the wedding.

The dictionary defines a country bumpkin as “an awkward simple rustic person.” The point of this song, I think,
is to suggest that being a country bumpkin is not such a bad thing.
Even if a country bumpkin’s life doesn’t measure up
to widespread notions of financial, social, and professional success –
maybe there are other, more important, measures of success.

This past spring, I re-embarked on a profession I’d worked at 10 years ago:
long-haul truck driving. This new job was a “Good Deal,” or so I thought –
two weeks on; one week off. In the off time I’d work on my ministry projects.
Or so I thought. I drove the beautiful 11 western states
for a big trucking company called Schneider.
You may have seen their orange trucks and trailers.
I loved much of it, but truck driving was tough for the four months I did it (the story of why I stopped is a sermon in itself).

Driving was hard: 14-hour days, getting lost in places like LA, frequent mechanical breakdowns. It was hard: searching for big rig parking when night fell, and avoiding accidents with crazy four-wheelers in a vehicle that takes two football fields to stop.

But a funny thing happened.

On several occasions I got loads through Hermiston into Portland. Portland, my home! Beautiful, leafy green trees, people I love. But the land around Hermiston?...hot in the summer, boring rolling wheat fields and sagebrush plains. An area with lots of little country towns that have fallen on hard times... I should’ve been happy to head back to Portland? Why wasn’t I?

The third time I noticed my heart sinking as I left Hermiston, I finally got it.

My heart remembered what my finely tuned aesthetics, political sensibilities, and career aspirations didn’t: where I belong.

I don’t know how or when I’ll get there. But I now know that to be truly happy, part of me has to spend time out where the Columbia Gorge opens up and the hills are covered with grass, not trees – Where it smells so sweet when it rains it almost makes me cry.

I’m a country bumpkin.
So where do you belong? Are there former homes, or places you spent summer vacations, or where you went for the holidays? Are you still in touch with those special places, or have you “moved on” in the hustle and bustle of life?

Likely a number of places lay claim to our hearts.

How can you rekindle the connection?

I do know that for some of us, mention of home and holidays brings up painful feelings. That’s normal. Please consider what you could do to “go home again” in a way that makes alternate memories; better memories – and lets you reclaim the good memories you have.

**Part 3:** Right after parts 1 and 2, I read in a book about a woman who received the spiritual message, “Simplify, Simplify.”

That doesn’t sound earth-shaking, but I read it at just the right moment. Simplify, simplify – not just our outward stuff and material possessions – though that is a wonderful practice.

What if we simplified *meaning*?

Focused on the *essential*?

What would make us feel like our time on earth has been worthwhile?

Going back to the country bumpkin lyrics, maybe it’s not how much we have, but *what* we have.

The verses in the song tell of a woman finding love
with a country bumpkin, giving birth to her son,
and dying with them both at her side.
For any of us, does it get more essential than that?
– finding partnership, leaving a legacy to the next generation,
dying surrounded by love?
Those are the cycles of the generations. Simplify, simplify.

I know not all of us are surrounded by people we love or trust.
Not all of us have the meaningful relationships we long for.
Maybe why that song makes me tear up is because
I’m so glad the “barroom girl with hard and knowing eyes”
made it to her better life.
She found what we all crave: Love, and to belong.
Listening to the song seems almost like a prayer;
a hope that somehow everyone might find their way
to those essential connections.

There is a Unitarian Universalist program called “Whose are We”?
Part of the workshop experience involves sitting with a partner
who asks us over and over again, “Whose are you?,”
and listens while we answer. The Rev. Victoria Safford writes
“the ancient question, “What am I?” inevitably leads to a deeper one,
“Whose am I?” – because there is no identity outside of relationships...
To ask “Whose Am I?” is to extend the questions far beyond
the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: ... Who loves you?... To whom do you answer? ... With whose life... is your own all bound up... ?” [end quote]

Think about it – whose are you? Who has a claim on you – heart, soul, body, and mind? What people, beliefs, beings, and places make you who you are? And are there any from the past you have forgotten or lost sight of through the years?

Those who heard me preach last time may recall that I like you all to be active in the sermon. Please humor me as we do a mini-workshop right here. I’m going to give you two minutes to turn to someone near you and answer “Whose are you?” Each person will get a turn. When I say go, find somebody to talk with; feel free to get up and move, especially if you need somewhere quieter.

Then, pick which one of you will go first in asking, again and again, “Whose are you?” and who will answer.

Then, in two minutes, I’ll ring the chime, and people can switch.

Sound good? Go.

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Thank you for participating.

I’d like to wrap up by sharing words from Dr. Brene’ Brown.
She’s a psychologist who describes herself as a vulnerability researcher. Now that may not sound immediately appealing …but wait.

Here are selections from a recent online interview: [quote]

“What I was really interested in doing [was] understanding connection... When I asked people, “Tell me about the relationships in your life...” what I heard was, “I’m so afraid of disconnection that I don’t let myself be seen. I go into a situation and I think... ‘Who should I be? What should I be?’...” So, I started studying vulnerability. And one of the things that has been very profound for me is that we live in a culture of scarcity. ... the most powerful read I get on people today is that most of us are walking on our journey thinking, “never enough.” ... Never good enough, ... never beautiful enough, never happy enough...and maybe the most dangerous – I mean, I get emotional talking about it because I think about my kids – never extraordinary enough. Like we live in a culture today that tells us that ordinary lives are synonymous with meaningless lives.”

We live in a culture today that tells us that ordinary lives are synonymous with meaningless lives. [unquote]

Do you believe that? Is there even a tiny part of you that has bought into the hype? If you can answer yes, think of the barroom girl. She made a life of love in a “simple, quiet and peaceful country place.” Where is your simple, quiet and peaceful country place?
Maybe it doesn’t have to be our physical home
so much as places and memories we hold inside us:
Places of beauty, and love, and connection ...
Places we are **enough**.

As we leave today, let us draw strength
from those many people and places that claim us as their own.
And may the heavy hand of time never erase
The raptured wonder from our faces.

So may it be. Amen.