

Okay, I admit it. I'm a UU junky. I love spending time with other UUs. Some Sundays I could spend all day at North Parish, living inside walls where love is the guiding principle and tolerance is practiced, ignoring the world of war and crime, prejudice and greed, long work hours and short vacations.

Although moving into North Parish and taking up residence may not be practical, I've found another place where they let you do just that. The Ferry Beach Camp and Conference Center in Saco, ME. I know many of you have come to our weekend in September and have experienced the magic of this special place. As two of the organizers for this weekend, my husband Gary and I thought that we were qualified to speak about the Ferry Beach experience. Weekend retreats have elements of what it is like to really be at Ferry Beach but it is too short. You just get into the Ferry Beach rhythm and it's time to clean up and go home. This morning I'm here to tell you that the more immersive, compelling, spiritually uplifting Ferry Beach experience is to spend a whole week attending a conference or vacationing. Now that's Ferry Beach in full swing. That's Ferry Beach at its best.

To the outside world, Ferry Beach is a campus of buildings. Quillen, the main building that houses the lobby, dining room and kitchen as well as two floors of sleeping rooms, is over 100 years old and was once a hotel for the railroad that ran from Boston to Old Orchard Beach. Rowland and Underwood as well as staff cabins and the ecology school headquarters are also part of the campus. You can see and hear the ocean from just about any of these buildings and on the grounds. And for the people who want to sleep closer to nature, there's the camping grove with towering pine trees and woodland trails. Although the beach setting, particularly for those of us who are landlocked, certainly enhances the experience, Ferry Beach is much more than a cluster of buildings and vacationing there is much more than spending a week at the seashore.

Rev. Fayre Stephenson often includes stories from the summer in her Sunday sermon during the last service of the summer season. These stories have always seemed to me to be the essence of Ferry Beach. I'd like to share some of these stories with you this morning. Some are my own and some I have borrowed from Fayre and Craig Lentz, Ferry Beach's executive director.

This is a story about young children, ages 2 to 6, that Craig considers the most inspirational experience of his 5½ years at Ferry Beach. "It was during a cookout at the beginning of August," he says. "It was our busiest week of the year, and it was hot. After dinner, several of us became aware of a group of young children playing together on the tennis court. This specific group of children were in program together in the morning, and somehow they had come together in a group and were sitting cross legged in a circle. There was a basketball that was being rolled back and forth among them. As a new child came, they would silently, and instinctually, scooch over to make room. They were quietly negotiating the rules of the game, which to the outside adult observer made little sense, but there were no arguments, no hurt feelings. There was a serenity

in this group that I have never experienced before in my life, a calm understanding and acceptance that is rare. This game continued for at least 20 minutes, even with teary-eyed adults gawking from the sidelines, taking pictures. The most amazing part of this game was that no adult organized them, or even got them started!"

Here are two of my stories.

This summer Gary and I attended a new conference whose central theme was choral singing, or rather I sang and Gary vacationed. We shared the campus with the gay men's conference, GAYLA. Although GAYLA had easily filled the campus for a number of years, they no longer needed all the rooms. Reluctantly Ferry Beach realized that they would need to bring in another conference to round out the numbers, and the choral week was added to this year's summer schedule. We heard that some of the GAYLA attendees were disgruntled that they would be sharing Ferry Beach with "outsiders". After all, one of the most powerful aspects of the week for them was to be in an exclusive community with other gay men.

It's been my experience that by and large, we singers are gregarious by nature. We were having a great time singing all morning, learning chants and gospel songs and our exuberance spilled over into group times when the two conferences were together. Many of the gay men met us more than halfway, and by Tuesday, the singers and GAYLA men were sharing tables during meals and when we were invited to the Tuesday Tea Dance, we all danced together, men and men, women and women and men and women, gays and straights.

A simple question such as "How long have you been attending GAYLA?" elicited some extraordinary stories from some of the men. The magic of Ferry Beach gave us the opportunity to learn what it was like to be a gay man in a straight world. Here are two of these personal stories that we heard that week.

Tom was a natural for the role of MC for the GAYLA talent show Thursday night. He was smooth and confident, easily joking with the crowd as he walked out on the stage. We'd seen him in the dining hall in shorts and a tee shirt boisterously laughing as he announced plans for the talent show and reminded participants that he would not be afraid to use the hook if they ran over their allotted time. But Tom has taken on a new personality for the show. He is radiant in a sequined long gown and sparkling jewelry, his short, thinning crew cut covered with a wig and his face transformed by artfully applied makeup and eye shadow. Women's clothing seemed to have augmented his usual bravado. Witty, sly remarks rolled easily off his tongue and his eyebrows rose as he gestured dramatically at the audience. Clearly this was a man practiced at dressing as a woman.

Yet we knew differently. Earlier in the week he and Brad, a longtime GAYLA attendee and Ferry Beach board member, asked to speak to our choral group to help build bridges between the two conferences. Tom told us

about himself. He lived out his Irish Catholic family's expectations and dutifully married and had children. His wife died young and his life was busy until his kids had grown and left home. Once they were out of the house, he said, "Now it was my time." At 44 he came out. "You should try cross-dressing," they told him when he started coming to GAYLA. GAYLA had been a series of new experiences, "Why not try another one?" he said. Some of the other men helped him pick out an outfit and wig from the GAYLA collection of clothing that is pulled out of storage every summer and others helped him put on makeup. "I found that dressing in woman's clothing was fun," he told us. "It brought out a playful side in me that I didn't know was there." Every summer he looks forward to putting on women's finery with some of his GAYLA brothers, and all during the rest of the year he's happy in men's clothing. Tom told us that when Family and Friends, another Ferry Beach summer conference, shared the campus with GAYLA, after several years the Family and Friends men caught the spirit and began wearing dresses for the Tuesday Tea Dance, one of the traditional GAYLA weekly events, no doubt helped with makeup and wardrobe by their wives. Although the two conferences have been held in different weeks for 17 years, Family and Friends still holds a Tuesday Tea Dance and the men still come in drag. Tom, with a tinge of jealousy, tells us that he hears their wardrobe room surpasses the GAYLA one.

And the second story.

It was the last hour of our vacation week. The car was packed. We'd worked our way around the dining room for an hour hugging and saying goodbye to all of our new friends. My husband Gary noticed a tall man in his 50s, one of the men from GAYLA, standing by himself in the Quillen Lobby. Gary approached him and introduced himself. "How did your week go?" he asked. The man responded, "This was the best week of my life". "Wow, that's quite a statement. What made the week extraordinary?" Gary asked. The man answered that this was the first week he'd ever spent in a community of gay men. In fact, until just a few months before he'd been living straight, had been married and had grown children. "Ferry Beach saved my life," he said, tears welling in his eyes. Gary started to tear up also, feeling the depth of this man's emotion. Gary reached out to him and they hugged, two strangers brought together by that Ferry Beach magic. "Will you come back next year," Gary asked. "Absolutely", he responded.

Music is a vital element of summer weeks at Ferry Beach, not only during the two weeks dedicated to music but for all of the conferences. Here are two of my favorite music stories.

Musicians and singers gathered in the Rose Pavilion in the campground area on Labor Day weekend in 2005 before the start of the Sunday service. There was an unusual degree of tension in the air. Just days before, Hurricane Katrina had slammed into the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts and the reports of the devastating loss of life filled the airwaves and newspapers. We felt that our music that morning should express our sorrow and also our prayers for the people of New Orleans, where music had been the soul of the city. We were

running through the pieces for the morning when a tenor voice joined the chorus, singing out strong and clear. No one had expected him to make the long drive from Michigan for this weekend, but there he was - Rev. David Carl Olson - ready to sing, as always. It was as if we just needed his presence for our plans to gel. One of the campers ran to her tent and returned with an umbrella. David stood at the head of the line of chorus members, the borrowed umbrella held high above his head. Kate Campbell-Strauss stood behind him, the large saxophone almost too big for her slight frame. We'd thrilled to her sax music all summer and knew that even though she was still a high school student, she played the sax as if she were born to it. The rest of us fell silently in line behind them. Kate began to play When the Saints Come Marching In. She played slowly, lovingly caressing each note, and the haunting sound echoed throughout the grove. David snapped to attention, his theatrical training apparent as his head rose and he took the first deliberate step. Following his lead, the column of mourners solemnly made its way into the outdoor sanctuary, some in tears. The song, David's New Orleans walk, Kate's incredible playing captured for me that day the sadness that we all felt for the loss of life and property and the loss of the spirit that was New Orleans.

But my story does not end there. As the service came to a close, David and Kate rose again and everyone at the service fell in line behind them. David's walk now had a snap to it and the umbrella bobbed jubilantly in the air. Kate played the Saints again; this time the beat was raucous and brash. As we lustily sang the familiar words, we banged, rang and rattled and strutted and danced our way through the woods and out into the grove again. We knew that New Orleans was months, perhaps years, away from cleaning out and building up again. Through music, as only music can, we captured the despair of the loss and the hope for the future.

And a story from earlier that same summer.

The Circle of Music singers were several days into learning a wonderful chant, the word Alleluia sung to the chords of the Pachelbel Canon. We were standing in a circle so that we could hear the blend of all of the parts. One group kept the root chords going as the rest of us added new harmonies. We were sharing the campus with UU Heritage Week and this year there were several divinity school students who were attending classes for graduate credits. One of the divinity students heard our music and was drawn to Gardiner, where we were practicing. We waved her in and invited her to join our circle. She quickly picked up the chords from the woman next to her, and soon, like us, was lost in the soothing repetition of the music. Our song leader encouraged us to take turns standing in the center of the circle so that the sound surrounded us. After several more rounds, we invited our guest to step into the middle. She slowly turned in the circle. When she was opposite me, I saw that she had her eyes closed and there were tears running down her cheeks. After a few minutes, she left the center of the circle and without a word, went back out onto the campus.

And finally, here's one last story from Fayre about the transformative power of the spirit of Ferry Beach.

A woman named Linda attending a conference told her tale during a weekday chapel service. At this particular chapel service the theme was the ocean and our spiritual relationship to it. She said that she had been a member of Alcoholics Anonymous for 20 years and she had been sober for those 20 years. Her family wanted to have a celebration - a party. She had joined AA at 27 and now, at 47, she would be one of the older wise ones of the group. She said she didn't feel like an old wise one. She didn't feel old and she wasn't sure she was ready to assume the status of being an old wise one by celebrating publicly at a party.

Linda hoped that while she was at Ferry Beach, she would decide what to do. The day before the service, Linda took a walk on the beach. As she walked along the sand toward Old Orchard Beach she watched for sand dollars and seashells. What she found was a really good specimen of green sea glass. As she held it in her hands, she felt how smooth the glass had become - smoothed by the ocean waves and the sand. No jagged edges - just beautiful and smooth.

She told us that she realized that she was like sea glass - we are all like sea glass. We all have jagged edges - perhaps alcoholism, or anger, or depression - but living in community is like the motion of the waves and, if we are open to it, our jagged edges can become smooth.

Linda decided she would let her family throw a party to celebrate her 20 years of sobriety. She was an old wise one - like sea glass, smooth and beautiful.

Like Linda, may we all find someplace that will wear away our rough edges, will free us to be who we are, where we can live in community for two hours, for a weekend or for a week with others who share and reinforce our values and interests. May we know the serenity of the ocean, deep peace of the woods, or majesty of the mountains, away from the tensions of the busy world. May we realize that going away to summer camp is not just for kids.

Amen and blessed be.