In his poem "The Layers" poet Stanley Kunitz says: "Live in the layers, not on the litter... I am not done with my changes." In this first summer service, which will introduce our theme of "Stories of Our Past, Dreams of Our Future", Rev. Steven will share some of his personal spiritual odyssey and invite us to reflect on the whole history of our being, the layers of our lives.

I have walked through many lives, some of them my own, and I am not who I was, though some principle of being abides, from which I struggle not to stray.

I shared the second reading, the poem The Layers by Stanley Kunitz, during a retreat with the Worship Associates earlier this year. I’d read the poem before, but when I read it this time, something resonated within me; I had a powerful spiritual experience as the poem invited me to reflect on my life: who I've been and who I am - the principle of being that abides; the experiences that have shaped me; the losses that come with aging; the aha moments that would change me in ways I didn't know were possible; the realization that I have always been called to the ministry and it would take half my life to finally say yes to this call in a way that allows me to be true to myself.

I was raised a Roman Catholic and attended a Catholic school for much of my grade school education. During those years, I was already questioning my understanding, if not the very existence, of God. One time I couldn't go on a field trip because I'd forgotten my permission slip. In those days, third graders didn't have cell phones, in fact there was no such thing as a cell phone, so I couldn't text mom or dad to bring my permission slip. So while my classmates went on a trip somewhere, I sat in church alone. I spent a few minutes begging God to make that permission slip appear and when it didn't I had some tough questions for the nuns. Is there really a God? Are you sure? If God is so great and so powerful, then where's my permission slip? So how can you be so sure there’s a God? I can imagine the nuns thinking: "I wish that little Unitarian Universalist would take his questions and go to the UU church down the street." I wouldn't discover Unitarian Universalism for another twenty five years or so, but I was well on the way with my natural curiosity and an unusually strong cynical streak. In the meantime, I went to church every Sunday with my family, made all the motions and kept my doubts a secret.
Catholicism and I parted ways in my early twenties as I struggled with my sexual identity. During a particularly rough time, I went to confession seeking some reassurance. When all I got was the response that I would burn in hell for being gay, I'd had enough. I told the priest to go to hell, walked out and decided to rebel. I became an Episcopalian. I'd always loved the ritual and the music and the art of Catholic liturgy and the Episcopal Church seemed so liberal. They openly welcomed me.

During my years as an Episcopalian, I served as the organist for a church in Portland, Oregon and was active in that congregation as a leader. I also met with the bishop of the Western Oregon diocese and asked to start the process toward ordination as a deacon and then eventually as a priest. The bishop said no with the best of reasons- the only openly gay priest in the diocese had a difficult time of things and the bishop didn't want me to go through that. At the same time, perhaps the bishop knew I was questioning Christianity. I was doing a lot of reading and came to the conclusion that Christianity had gone seriously wrong. With its creeds and elaborate doctrines, it had become the religion about Jesus rather than the religion of Jesus. I realized I didn't believe in the divinity of Jesus and that Christianity didn't make sense to me. Another powerful, rebellious moment came when I asked my parish priest if I could renounce my baptism. He said no. My reply? "You watch me". About a month later, I renounced my baptism in a pagan ritual outdoors under the full moon and decided I'd worship the mother Goddess. It seemed like the thing to do in Oregon, land of late night conversations in hot tubs, new age music playing everywhere, and alternative spirituality shops around every corner.

It was around this time I met my first partner at a pagan gathering and we began a relationship we both hoped would last our lifetime. After three years together, we decided to move to southern Oregon and open a small retail business. As we settled down, we realized that we needed a spiritual community. He suggested the local Unitarian Universalist congregation. Even though I'd been reading about world religions, I'd never heard of Unitarian Universalism. The first Sunday service we attended was a revelation. I was challenged to think for myself by a funny, wise curmudgeon of a minister who didn’t talk about God and who referred to prayer as focusing our collective consciousness. As I greeted the minister afterwards, I let her know that I was a first time visitor that morning and a lapsed Episcopalian. She responded by saying: "Our service was weird, wasn’t it?" It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced but I was totally hooked. I had found my spiritual home in Unitarian Universalism. After two years in southern Oregon and a few years in Kansas where we attended the Lawrence fellowship, my partner and I moved to Minneapolis. We'd been there about a year when we attended a UU service that was lay led and I spoke during the service. Afterward he complimented me on how well I had spoken and then asked if I'd ever thought about the ministry.

At that moment I knew I was called to the Unitarian Universalist ministry and began planning to go to seminary. Soon after that we realized that our relationship no longer worked and we parted company. It was a time of much joy and much grief as a new chapter of my life began. Stanley Kunitz says:
In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:
"Live in the layers,
not on the litter."

My relationship had become litter, wreckage strewn behind me. I realized how much of myself I had put aside over the last 8 years for the sake of love and I wasn't sure who I was anymore. It was time to recreate myself. Even as I grieved the loss of the relationship, I felt a yearning to reawaken to life's richness and to rediscover the whole history of my being. "Live in the layers, not on the litter." Kunitz said these words came to him in a dream. "In the middle of the night, I'd had this dream of a voice out of a cloud, and this is what the voice spoke to me. ‘Live in the layers, not on the litter.’ I think it's important for one's survival to keep the richness of the life always there to be tapped. One doesn't live in the moment, one lives in the whole history of your being, from the moment you became conscious." Rev. Janet Bush writes: " How do we make sense? Where are do we find the truths and meaning in our own lives? They are in the whole history of our being, in the layers of family and work and community; of baseball games and watching TV and sitting on the porch; of ideas, music, and art; of heartbreak and hilarity, moments of absurdity and moments of grace. Some principle of being abides. We learn, we grow, and we change. Our histories, personal and communal, are composed of story and fact, layers and litter. They include broken pieces that may or may not provide reliable clues. Sometimes we need to work at putting the broken pieces back together. Sometimes, we need to sweep them up and move on."  

My time in seminary would become a time to both put some broken pieces back together and to sweep others up and move on. It was necessary work, because I needed to understand the self I brought to the ministry, with my gifts and my flaws and my passions. As I shaped this new chapter of my life, I worshipped at First Universalist Church in Minneapolis, made new friends, fell in love with my old house and spent many hours working on it. Tearing out a wall is great therapy. I rebelled again. I drove a gold sports car, grew a goatee, and got a tattoo. My heart healed and in spite of significant losses and changes, the death of loved ones, including my father, I found deeper joy and a whole new purpose in life. Now, fifteen years after my call to be a minister, I'm in many ways a statistical UU- in my 50s, excessively educated, politically liberal, and predominantly Humanist in my theology, although it continues to evolve. When I first arrived here in Iowa City, I told a member of the congregation that with one good shove I'd tumble right down the hill into Humanism. So this person pushed me and it seems to have worked.

Now I resonate with the Rev. William Murry who speaks of Religious Naturalist Humanism as a way of living that "promotes an ethical life in which one thinks and acts from a larger perspective than one’s own egoistic interests, a life that affirms the worth and dignity of each person, a life filled with wonder and reverence for the extraordinary
magnificence of the natural world and human creations. It includes gratitude for the gift of life itself and the capacity to enjoy it." That is a very good description of who I aspire to be as a human being. I've also finally accepted the truth that I'm in the second half of my life. About two years ago I really struggled with the truth of my own mortality. When I talked with my spiritual director about coming to terms with aging, she did two things. First, she told me to get over it, saying: "You can't be a fifty year old who talks about spiritual maturity but wants to act like a 20 year old." This was one time I wasn't rebellious. I didn't say: "Oh yeah? Watch me!" Then she gave me Richard Rohr's book Falling Upward, which has been very helpful. I've taken seriously Rohr's invitation to discover a wholeness and an authenticity that wasn't possible in the first half of my life. In the first reading, he said that: "Most of us think of the second half of life as largely about getting old, dealing with health issues, and letting go of our physical life, but the whole thesis of this book is exactly the opposite. What looks like falling can largely be experienced as falling upward and onward, into a broader and deeper world, where the soul has found its fullness, is finally connected to the whole, and lives inside the Big Picture."

Where we begin to fully integrate ourselves and we know the layers where the principle of being abides. We experience the fullness of life, the truth within the truths, mysteries and surprises in the stories, losses and hope. Rohr goes on to say: "In the second half of life, we can give our energy to making even the painful parts and the formally excluded parts belong to the now unified field – especially people who are different, and those who have never had a chance. Only in this “unified field” beyond the chaos and the contradictions of this life can we find healing. It feels like a return to simplicity after having learned from all the complexity. Finally, at last, one has lived long enough to see that “everything belongs,” even the sad, absurd and futile parts." As we enter the unified field, we become comfortable with our entire selves and also with ambiguity, paradox, mystery and change, even though we may not completely understand. From the Kunitz poem:

Though I lack the art
 to decipher it,
 no doubt the next chapter
 in my book of transformations
 is already written,
 I am not done with my changes.

As Unitarian Universalists, our fourth principle, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, reminds us that we are never done with our changes. There will always be new truth waiting to be discovered and opportunities for spiritual growth that help us discover the principle of being that abides within every one of us. As our members and friends share their spiritual odysseys and speak their truths to us, may this summer be an invitation to you to know more deeply your own truths, to embrace all of who you are in its mystery and wonder, and to discover and live in the layers of your life ever more fully.

May it be so.
References

5. Rohr, Richard, Ibid., pg. 114.
But even from the first week, it was a nightmare. When I moved in, the house was cold and absolutely filthy, and the cooker didn’t work. I discovered everything in the countryside is more expensive: you have to drive miles to find a shop where everything costs twice as much as in my local supermarket in London. I never fitted in. I think that in the country, if you are a woman, you will never be accepted unless you are a full-time mum. Another thing I hated was the shooting! I just couldn’t pass a group of men with guns, shooting rabbits and deer, without getting out of my car and saying: â€œDo