

A Thousand Shades of Green  
(a sermon delivered at Unity Church—Unitarian, St. Paul, MN)

On a steamy Friday morning at the end of June, I pack the car with my daughter's belongings—the cedar chest we're giving her...the china and silverware she inherited from Aunt Babe...four plastic storage containers filled with clothing, scrapbooks, and other treasures. Into the old station wagon I also pack the electronic keyboard we bought at Sam's for our son-in-law's birthday...plus the computer that Ellen and her siblings bought her mother for her 80th birthday.

We happened to mention to Rob and Janne Eller-Isaacs back in March or April that we had a bunch of Nora's stuff that we wanted to take her in Oakland. We were planning to rent a trailer or a small van—but Rob and Janne said, "You can drive Jonah's car!" Their son Jonah would be graduating from college on the east coast and wanted to drive with them to the west coast when vacation started. We would be doing him a great favor—his car would wind up in the Bay Area, and they would not have to drive cross-country in two different cars. And of course the benefit for us was obvious—we could fill Jonah's 1982 Volvo station wagon, drive it to California, then fly home. Perfect!

We completed the arrangements, and I let Jonah know when we wanted the car. Rob and Janne's vacation begins when they leave for General Assembly, and Jonah celebrates graduation with a white-water rafting trip in Idaho. A week before we're to leave, I call Jonah reconfirming that I want the car following Tuesday or Wednesday, a few days before we leave...so we won't be packing at the last minute. *No problem.* On Monday, Jonah calls to say the car is being serviced, but will be ready tomorrow morning...*no problem.* He calls again on the next morning—a *slight* glitch with the car, but it will be ready tomorrow. Wednesday, same thing—the car's not quite ready.

Now there's a problem—and I'm starting to fret. Time's running out. Our trip is four days on the road, and we've already got our plane tickets for the trip home—no wiggle room on either end—and we want at least a couple of days in between to see Nora and Rick. Finally, on Thursday evening, Jonah drops off the car.

So now it's Friday morning, and I'm sweating profusely in the sweltering sun and humidity as I squeeze in the last few items. The only thing left is Nora's bike. I've packed it in a shipping box I got from a bike dealer months ago, and now—as I wrap the box with plastic sheeting that I bought a few days ago—I'm thinking how *clever* of me to have thought of that box...how *efficient* that I have already taken the bike apart...how *smug* I am—until I realize I have nothing to tie the now-wrapped box to the luggage carrier on top of the car.

*Hmmmm.* I end up using a 25-foot heavy-duty extension cord.

At last the old green station wagon is ready. It's noon and I'm drenched with sweat. To put down the back seat for our cargo, we've had to push the front seats forward and adjust the seat backs straight up. I think: This is going to be a long trip.

We set off...but before we can even get out of town, the bicycle box begins to bang on the roof, buffeted by the wind. I stop. The bike is secure—it's not going anywhere—but we've got to do something about that banging. We stop at Target for some heavy-duty straps. *That* does it! The plan is to stop at Ellen's folks' in Mitchell, South Dakota—350 miles or so, a long half-day's drive. We'll spend the night and set up the computer for Ellen's mother. The next day we'll drive to Evergreen, Colorado, just beyond Denver...where Ellen's sister Bonnie lives. Then the next

two days...Sunday and Monday, July first and second...we'll complete the trip.

Somewhere beyond Albert Lea, I notice that we've left behind the turmoil of our beginning: That banging sound is gone...we've settled into the seats, which are really quite comfortable...I've forgotten the frustration of getting the car so late and having to pack it in the heat. Gone even is any concern about the road-worthiness of this 20-year-old Volvo with 235,000 miles—it's running just fine. The turmoil of beginning is behind us—and I notice for the first time how beautiful the countryside is. The spring and early summer have brought us ample rain, and the fields are lush and...*green!...a thousand shades of green!* That description amuses me, both because it's accurate...and because I've been looking for a sermon title.

Even South Dakota is green. Promoters lured homesteaders to Dakota Territory 125 years ago with visions of fertile fields...ripening corn and wheat, as far as the eye can see. Some settlers in fact *did* prosper—at least the first few years. Then came the dry years, when fields parched and withered. In Dakota, dry years are the norm—but it's not dry *this* year. I especially like the late afternoons, when the shadows are long and everything softens...or early mornings, before the sun is high overhead, when the air seems filled with possibility.

The next morning we leave Mitchell before seven-thirty. We drive west on I-90 a few miles, then turn south on a state road to Platte, then west again and follow the valley down to the Missouri River, the "Big Muddy." Some people believe we should consider the Mississippi River and all the rivers that feed it as tributaries to the wide Missouri, rather than the other way around. The Missouri starts in southwestern Montana and flows more than 25-hundred miles before joining the Mississippi just north of St. Louis.

In South Dakota, the land east of the Missouri is called "east river"...much more fertile than "west river," which is rangeland, badlands, Indian Territory. At Rosebud, the sky is black with an approaching summer storm as we turn south and drive through heavy rain into Nebraska. At North Platte—the rain a hundred miles behind us, or more—we connect with I-80. As we speed westward past green ripening fields measured more in miles than acres, I reflect that I-80 comes west into Nebraska from Illinois and Iowa, passing within a mile of *my* family farm. My family settled tiny Dayton, Illinois, in the late autumn of 1829, on a site selected by John Green, my great-great-grandfather. He had looked all over northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin for a suitable source of water power to build a mill, until he found the site on the Fox River, just upstream of where it flows into the Illinois at Ottawa. Family lore has it that he rejected Chicago, judging it too low and swampy ever to amount to much.

Just past Ogallala, Nebraska, we turn southwest and cross into Colorado and soon climb into high-plateau country. The green fields of Nebraska are behind us, the Colorado Rockies still far in the distance ahead of us...and the afternoon sun beats down hot and bright as we speed west. How many CDs does it take for a 2,000-mile trip? At least 26, we conclude—Willie Nelson, the Beatles, Bonnie Raitt, Jacques Brel, music of the 1940s. We discover that among our CD selections are at least five different versions of "Stardust," Hoagy Carmichael's wistful ballad of lost love.

We reach Denver in the late afternoon, then make the climb 77-hundred feet to Evergreen. That evening at Bonnie's house we plan our attack on the remaining distance. I'm for following the interstate all the way—I-70 west through Utah, north to Salt Lake City, picking up I-80 again for the final push west. Sure, we'll have to drive north a little out of our way...a hundred and fifty miles maybe...maybe even more...but think how fast we can drive!

Ellen has another idea. She points on the map to Highway 50, which runs straight across

Utah and Nevada, into northern California at South Lake Tahoe. It's much more direct...but is it good road? We consult our brother-in-law, Jorie, who thinks it *is* good road.

In the end, we decide to pick up Highway 50 at Holden, Utah.

I don't realize it until later, but in that instant of decision-making, we are no longer on a *trip*—we're on a *journey*. Early the next morning, we say goodbye to Bonnie and her family. We have a long day of driving ahead, but we are eager to get going. Up, up, through Golden, up through Loveland Pass, then on west along the Colorado River—past Glenwood Springs, New Castle, Pallisade, on to Grand Junction, then into Utah.

I remember that I am not the first of my family to come this way. A hundred and fifty years ago, my forebear John Green led three different continental crossings during the California Gold Rush. Alas, the only thing they discovered was how hard it is to get rich quick.

During the days of the great wagon trains, people often abandoned cherished family heirlooms along the way...things they once thought they could not live without...now burdens on the long trek west. Well, the only thing *we* will leave along the way is the computer that we set up for Ellen's mother back in Mitchell! The cedar chest in the back on this old green Volvo station wagon was made for Mamma, my grandmother, the year she was born (1901) made from cedar cut on the Kentucky farm where she was born. Even after a hundred years, it still smells faintly of cedar. It was Mamma's most prized possession, and she carried it with her through a succession of addresses. Nora has always admired this old cedar chest...and I know Mamma would be thrilled to know that it is being passed to someone dear.

I used to drive Mamma sometimes when I was a teenager, and she always entertained me with a non-stop commentary in that stream-of-consciousness way that she had: "That's where Miss Polly used to live...*Poor* ol' Mrs. Taylor—murdered in her sleep!...Look at that pretty red barn..." Of course, *I* want to know more about poor ol' Mrs. Taylor—but Mamma's attention is already a mile farther down the road: I leaned long ago that it's no use trying to interrupt her to find out about Mrs. Taylor.

After a delightful side trip past a ghost town named "Cisco" to see the Arches National Park at Moab, we press on—climbing again as we reach Salina, Utah. This is interesting country: In another mood, I might call it "wasteland"...but now it intrigues me, for I am determined to notice any shade of green. I decide to ignore the ugly rusting trailers and bits of scarred landscape that we pass from time to time. Instead, I focus on the sage, the scrub, the stunted but hardy bushes...red and green rocks...gray and black shale...a small herd of antelope.

The miles race by, and at last we reach our turnoff: We are leaving the interstate to pick up Highway 50, which bills itself as "America's Loneliest Highway." We are relieved to notice that...even if it is only two lanes...it's a good road. Highway 50 follows almost exactly the northern, or mountain, branch of the old Santa Fe Trail. The Pony Express riders came this way too. They covered the 2,000 miles between St. Joseph, Missouri, and Sacramento, California, in just 10 days...and despite the many hazards they faced, only one mail delivery was ever lost in the entire 18-month history of the Pony Express.

Now it is late on a Sunday afternoon in Mormon Utah, and the towns are spaced far apart. We fill the tank at Hinckley, knowing the next service is 110 miles away, across the Great Basin Desert, past dry Sevier Lake...but I find this country beautiful too.

The landscape makes me recall a letter that my father wrote to my mother in late November 1943, just before they were married. His unit, the 12th Armored Division, had just moved from Fort Campbell, Tennessee, to Camp Barkeley, Texas. My mother was in Kentucky,

and my father had been on a short leave to visit his family in Illinois...*his* dad, my Grandfather Green, was critically ill with cancer. My dad's letter to my mom recounted the trip to Texas.

After 1,235 miles, several flat tires, gas rationing, and a couple of breakdowns, he finally arrived in Abilene about noon. "I have been busy ever since," he wrote. "Texas is a large state. There are undoubtedly nice parts of it. But I haven't seen them. There's only one blade of grass per acre. The sun is warm and shines every day. The evenings are cool but not cold. The weather is almost ideal. As a matter of fact, it is almost as good as Texans say it is."

It is nearly sundown by the time we reach the Nevada state line (and the first slot machines). I want to cover as much distance as we can—and I am enchanted by this magnificent, great country around us. We climb through one mountain pass, then another...dropping and climbing once again. It's dusk by the time we reach Ely. How friendly, I think, for these westerners to have named so many of their towns after familiar places in Minnesota! Ely, Hinckley, Glenwood, Stillwater—all familiar names!

I want to go farther yet, to Eureka...but I wonder: Will there be somewhere to stay? Yes, a woman tells me—but take care driving after dark. For deer and antelope? Yes, she says—and...because this is open range...also watch out for cows—they sometimes lie down to sleep on the warm pavement!

Fully alert, we drive on in the deepening twilight another 75 miles, up through the White Pine Mountains, the Pancake Range, the Diamond Mountains. Finally, after nine, we reach Eureka. It is long after dark, and we have been on the road for more than 14 hours...but we're a third of the way across Nevada.

We're off again early the next day, Monday, July second. Eureka is at an elevation of more than 10,000 feet, and we plunge immediately into Diamond Valley, then climb into the Toiyabe Range, down into the Big Smoky Valley...up again into the Toiyabe Range...then the Shoshone Range and the Desatoya Range. We descend into a broad valley, past the dry bed of Carson Lake. At Silver Springs, the irrigated desert suddenly blooms—how strange to see a field of healthy green grass sharply defined against the brown scrub of arid desert!

On we drive toward the capital, Carson City...then to South Lake Tahoe on the Nevada-California border—high and sparkling blue, the air fragrant with the smell of spruce...but the roads crowded with tourists just before the 4th. Then up, up again before the long, final descent down the mountains...through the Gold Country, where my ancestors once sought their fortune...and on to Sacramento, where we pick up I-80 for the final leg into the Bay Area.

It's 4:30 in the afternoon, and we're outside Nora and Rick's apartment building in Oakland. It's unusually warm for the Bay Area...over 90. Nora is at work, but Rick helps us unload this old green station wagon. It has brought us 2,361 miles in four days. I observe that it's a good thing we came by station wagon, rather than wagon train: *That* journey took four-to-six months!

We move Mamma's old cedar chest into the living room and open it to show Rick the jumper and the little plastic shoes that Nora wore on the flight from Korea when she first came to us. She was only two and half—so tiny!—but she already had a good sense of herself. One evening she sang into one end of her jump-rope, as if it were a microphone and she an entertainer on TV. We laughed...until she got angry, thinking we were ridiculing her.

Here are her scrapbooks, crammed with photos and mementoes—her successes as a gymnast, the year she spent as an exchange student in Australia, a photo with Dave Winfield the night she was awarded the Winfield Scholarship...and here, the pink Korean *han-bok* she wore as

a child on dress-up occasions, like Bonnie's wedding. Nora has a new *han-bok* now, a grown-woman's *han-bok*—a beautiful fuscha *han-bok* that she wore for her own wedding. She's a lovely young woman, and now she's expecting a baby—our first grandchild...due in January.

Rick takes us to the chic "Asian fusion" restaurant in San Francisco that Nora manages. We meet some of her co-workers—it seems at least half of them are from Minnesota. So too is the staff at the restaurant where Rick waits tables—we meet *them* the next evening: "Yeah, I'm from Maplewood"... "I'm from Golden Valley"... "Roseville"... "Eden Prairie."

We think we know why young people are attracted to the Bay Area: There is so much to do, and anything goes in San Francisco—always has, still does. This is a place that truly prizes tolerance and diversity, and Oakland across the bay is no different. Our motel in downtown Oakland sits on the edge of the city's Chinatown, which we explore with delight.

Nora takes us to the Napa Valley on Tuesday, July 3rd, where the thermometer tops 100-degrees...and on Wednesday—the 4th of July, still broiling—we take in a baseball game between the A's and the Anaheim Angels, then an open-air concert and fireworks display at Concord in the evening.

We are going home tomorrow, the 5th...but one thing remains: Where to leave Jonah's car? He had told me to park it on the street by Nora's, but there is no room at all. We look through the phone book, can't find a number for Janne's parents, who live in Oakland. We call Louise Wolfgramm, one of Rob and Janne's partners on the Executive Team—perhaps she has the number of the mobile phone in Rob and Janne's car. She is puzzled that we are calling on the 4th of July, but no, she doesn't have that number. How about leaving the car with Rebecca Parker, the dean of the Starr King theological school in nearby Berkeley? They're good friends—but we can't find Rebecca Parker's number in the phone book. Maybe Barbara Hubbard, their other partner on the Executive Team, has a number for Rob and Janne. No, she doesn't have the number of the mobile phone either. How about Rebecca Parker? No, tried that already.

Then Barbara remembers the name of the administrator at First Unitarian of Oakland, Rob and Janne's former church. Jay Roller. I look in the phone book...*Jay Roller!* I call—he's home! And yes, he will be glad to take care of the car until Jonah can pick it up. Just drop it by the next day on our way to the airport. It's lucky we called when we did: He was just on his way out the door for the holiday. We are relieved and very grateful—yet another shade of green, I think!

The next morning, we drop off Jonah's old Volvo at First Unitarian, a few blocks away in downtown Oakland. Jay gives us a quick tour of this lovely old church, built in 1891, a national historic landmark. With some trepidation, I confide to him that I was on the search team that selected Rob and Janne...and I assure him that we are very pleased to have them at Unity Church.

The time comes for us to leave. The trip is almost over, but not the *journey*. We remember that this very day, July 5th, marks the 25th anniversary of when Nora came from Korea—July 5th, 1976. We recall the awe we felt at becoming parents. We had been told that she liked apples, so the night she came, we fed her slices of apple. She was cautious, unsure...who wouldn't be? Twenty-five years ago, 1976...our bicentennial baby. Now she is grown, the manager of a restaurant, able to recommend a specific wine to a customer who wants something light, dry, "perhaps a little fruity." Grown...and expecting a baby of her own: Such wonder! Yet another shade of green!

Aboard the plane on the way home, I wonder whether Nora will some day make a journey such as the one we have...maybe one day when it's her turn to pass Mamma's cedar chest on to another so dear. I have come west with Ellen, of course...but also with Mamma, my father and mother, my Grandmother Green...even with some I never knew: my Grandfather Green, my Great-great-grandfather John Green...pioneers and wagon trains and Pony Express riders. On a journey, we never really travel alone.

I cannot know who will make the journey with Nora...but I hope that she takes notice of her companions. And more: I hope that on her journey she will look past the ugly and choose to see beauty instead.

Not that I want her—in the quest for beauty—to turn away from injustice or ignore corruption or deny the existence of evil. No, what I wish for her is that she sees past the ugly, to the beauty...that she takes in—as Ellen and I have—*all* this vast land of spacious skies and sweeping valleys, lush green fields and majestic mountains, where deer and antelope play (and cows sleep on the road)...this magnificent land... this beautiful, enormous, country.

My wish for her...and for our grandchild...and for our great-grandchildren...is to experience the awe of life. May she know the touch of one generation upon the shoulders of the next...may she look upon her companions with affection...and may she marvel at all the lovely shades of green!