

OUR JOURNEY: FROM THE EDGE TO THE CENTER OF THE FAITH

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CALL TO WORSHIP

Commenting on religion, Thomas Jefferson once said, "it does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty Gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." Look at your neighbors in this sanctuary this morning and ask yourselves, is that true? Can each Unitarian Universalist believe whatever he or she wants? At what cost? Come, let us worship together.

SERMON

Three centuries ago, a prisoner in the county jail of Bedfordshire, England authored a story of some 100,000 words. It tells of a character named Christian, who lives in the City of Destruction. Christian is deeply troubled by what he reads in a prophetic book – not named, but from the context, obviously the Bible. He is overcome by a great sense of burden about his life. Acutely fearful that the burden will cause him to sink into hell, he casts about for some means of deliverance. Evangelist happens by, urging Christian to go to the Wicket Gate. After unsuccessfully imploring his wife and children to go with him, Christian sets out.

En route to the Wicket Gate, Worldly Wise Man distracts Christian with the prospect of gaining deliverance from his burden through Law. He introduces Christian to Mr. Legality and his son Civility, who live in the village of Morality. Providentially, Christian once more crosses paths with Evangelist, who reorients him toward the Wicket Gate. Arriving there, Christian meets the gatekeeper, Good Will, who is later revealed to be Jesus. Good Will shows him the way onto the King's Highway, which is described as "straight and narrow." This road, Good Will explains, will lead to the deliverance Christian is seeking.

Christian experiences many successes and many setbacks on his journey along this road. He obtains a passport into the Celestial City, his final destination. In the Valley of Humiliation he battles a dragon. After a harrowing overnight stay in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, he chances upon Faithful, another traveler who also hails from the City of Destruction. They travel through Vanity Fair, where they are arrested for being disdainful of the wares on sale there. Faithful is executed. Christian escapes, accompanied by a resident of Vanity Fair named Hopeful. A wrong turn or two later, after a brief imprisonment by a giant named Despair who locks them up in his Doubting Castle, Christian and Hopeful are welcomed into the Celestial City.

I'm sure that at least some of you recognize this as a very short synopsis of The Pilgrim's Progress, by John Bunyan, a classic of English literature that has been translated into over 200 languages. Bunyan was a tinker and a preacher. He found the time to write his masterpiece by virtue of being jailed for conducting religious events without the sanction of the Church of England. I would call him a heretic.

This intensely Christological seventeenth century allegory pulls me in. I think it's because it provides the best metaphor I can find for the quest for spiritual transformation. The most important message I take from The Pilgrim's Progress is that our religious community is not our spiritual home – even though we often hear it spoken of that way. We are not at home. As Meister Eckhart said, “God is at home. We are in the far country.”

We are homeless foreigners, spiritually speaking. We have left our spiritual homes of origin, no longer feeling at home there, but more importantly, we are not at home here either. We have somewhere we need to go – a place we have never been. If we do get where we need to go, we will arrive there as foreigners too. We are “strangers and exiles on earth,” as the ancestors confessed in today's reading from the Book of Hebrews. The religious word for such a person is pilgrim, which literally means “foreigner.” Finding religion is not about being at home at last, relaxing in your spiritual easy chair. It's about a particular kind of journey – a pilgrimage.

A pilgrimage rarely if ever begins from a happy place. It is fueled by trouble and dissatisfaction. John Bunyan described his pilgrim hero's starting point as the City of Destruction. It is a place of fragmentation – of having been pulled apart from all that we sense we should be a part of.

The destination of the journey is wholeness, the opposite of fragmentation -- a place of being a part of all that we belong with. A condition of fulfillment, in which we say without hesitation, “this was meant to be.” And we use the passive voice because who or what is doing the meaning remains unclear; but it is a mystery we are willing to accept. When we find ourselves in this place of wholeness, our relentless human urge to make further explanations is satisfied. It is one way we know we actually have arrived there.

Davidson Lohr, the heretical senior minister of the Austin, Texas UU church, talks about this experience of wholeness as a “reunion.” “A reunion with a life lived, as the Romans put it, ‘under the gaze of eternity’: a life lived as though all of history's noblest souls — as well as the better angels of our nature — were watching us.” And he's right, including the part about “angels” and “eternity,” which are words for pointing toward the mystery that lies outside time and space and goes by many names, including God. We can readily grasp the idea, and the value, of a reunion with family, with nature, with community, and even with our fellow humans taken as a whole. But reunion with God is a much harder conversation.

In talking about the quest for reunion or wholeness, many religious liberals refer to spirit rather than God. As the Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams observed,

Our ultimate dependence for being and freedom is upon a creative power and upon processes not of our own making . . .

The creative power that operates in the shaping of freedom in the world may be identified as God, but however such power is named, it represents the ultimate concern of the religious liberal.

This vernacular is also reflected in the first of the six Sources of Our Living Tradition in Unitarian Universalism – the “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and openness to the forces which create and uphold life.” To convey this meaning more effectively, some liberal theologians turn away from the definitional and toward the poetic. Alfred North Whitehead describes these creative forces as

something which stands beyond, behind, and within the passing flux of immediate things; something which is real, and yet waiting to be realized; something which is a remote possibility, and yet the greatest of present facts; something that gives meaning to all that passes, and yet eludes apprehension; something whose possession is the final good, and yet is beyond all reach; something which is the ultimate ideal, and the hopeless quest.

Now, if this descriptive exercise feels confusing and uncomfortable, that’s not surprising. In our materialist culture, there is a strong tendency to insist that terms be defined before the discussion begins in earnest. This is a fine principle for a secular discussion, but not for exploring a spiritually transformative pilgrimage. For that, we have to let go of the idea that one cannot talk about something without defining it first.

The destination of the pilgrimage is a place in which the connection to this hard-to-name spiritual power can be experienced with strength and clarity. Without that connection, all of the other sought-after reunions fall short of wholeness. With it, the experience of the pilgrim is one of perfect sufficiency, a sense that the day you are given, with all of its so-called shortcomings, is exactly what it should be, that nothing needs to be fixed or added for you to be complete and worthy. If the end of the pilgrimage were a city, as in John Bunyan’s extended metaphor, it would be a place so wondrous that this feeling of perfect enoughness would fill most of our days, even the days that bring sadness and loss.

To find such a city would be sublime. The journey is a more complicated story. Its purpose is transformation, for which disruption of existing habits and patterns is essential – including longstanding relationships with family, friends, and community. Jesus, Moses, Buddha, Bunyan’s pilgrim, the man who got up from supper in this morning’s poem by Rilke -- in all these figures we see this toll taken. Experiencing his own resistance to such disruptions, the pilgrim discovers the sobering truth of these words from the poet Auden:

We would rather be ruined than changed
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And see our illusions die.

He also discovers what it is like to find his way using a sense other than the conventional first five. Using this sense is a process of starting and stopping, waiting for subtle clues and then conducting trial and error experiments. It is not at all like navigating in the conventional sense. More like moving around the desert listening for faint strains of music from a distant source, twiddling the dials of a radio receiver to hear an intelligible signal through all the static.

Given these challenges, the risk of failing to reach the destination in this life is high. The pilgrim will not get his money back if he is less than completely satisfied. And no, he can't see the goods before he invests in such a venture. Why? Because he is the goods. If the journey is successful, he won't be the same pilgrim who wanted to check out the goods ahead of time. And if they were the kind of goods that could be checked out beforehand, they wouldn't be transformative. For most people, therefore, the motivation to take this kind of journey must come from an interior source other than that signal processor in your head that calculates pleasure and pain. Not very many people are willing to listen to such a source.

The prophetic voices in every religion offer the same solemn appraisal of the path to spiritual transformation as tremendously difficult. They use metaphors as narrow and vertiginous as a razor's edge laid across an abyss. In language that surely underlay Bunyan's image of the Wicket Gate in The Pilgrim's Progress, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it." (Matthew 7:13-14) Life. By that, I'm quite sure, Jesus meant "spiritual life." The enlivening that makes matter live and life matter.

The message of this beckoning to "the narrow gate" is unfolded more fully in Jesus' declaration that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:24-26) This famous epigram is commonly interpreted as setting up a conflict between wealth and spiritual transformation, but Jesus' point is much more profound.

In his time, wealth was interpreted as a sign of worthiness. And so the disciples expressed astonishment at his statement, asking "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." For the camel to go through the eye of a needle is impossible as a matter of physics, he is saying, but as a matter of metaphysics, all things are possible. The narrow path to spiritual transformation requires great devotion, but if the seeker seeks it only with his native wit, it is impossible. On the other hand, if he opens himself to some assistance from a higher source, everything will be different. Jesus honestly admonishes us about the difficulty of the pilgrimage and beckons us to it in the same breath.

The quest for a spiritual transformation that leads to wholeness will always be heretical. The reason is not because the questing ones necessarily will always be a minority. Heresy comes from a Greek word that means to choose, rather than be docile, and this quest involves a continuous choosing and rechoosing. The quest utterly depends on this choicefulness, because the path shifts continually. Choicefulness is the opposite of orthodoxy, which suppresses choice, turns a blind eye to the shifting quality of the path, and poisons spiritual transformation.

I've opened up a very serious subject with you this morning. I ask myself whether I have the authority to beckon you to such a life-altering journey. Not authority in the sense of official permission, but rather, in the sense of authorship. Is the authenticity of my own journey clear enough to me to warrant my professing it to you?

On that journey, I have seen my own heart open. I also have seen how much more opening has yet to happen, and that's exciting. I see my life changing – sometimes so rapidly it is disquieting. A crack has appeared in my habitual privileging of doing over being in my life, and I'm working on enlarging that crack. Those of you who have seen my unreconstructed side from time to time may raise an eyebrow at this. I can only say, you should have seen me back in the day!

I'm learning not to seduce myself and others with my well-honed gift for making something sound good. I'm discovering that I can live with doubt, that this is not an impeachment of my sincerity. My journey will involve self-doubt, confusion, and discouragement. I will continue to get lost. A voice in my head will continue to say, accusingly, that I am not really on the journey at all. I will continue to provide evidence to support these accusations by not acting like the image I have in my head of a person on a path to spiritual transformation. All of this is part of my journey. It isn't easy . . . and I don't want to trade with anyone.

I can never go back – not to the collision of white shirt fronts in federal court; not to my relentlessly logical way of looking at the world; not even to the sermon I delivered on this very subject just two years ago, ninety percent of which is now unusable because I just don't look at things the same way these days – a satisfying and outrageously inconvenient discovery I've made with sermon after sermon in the past year.

My description of the pilgrimage may sound like joining the French Foreign Legion, but I'm not quite finished. Since this is a spiritual journey, it is not governed by the rules applicable to material journeys. It has the freedom to be paradoxical. One such paradox is that the arriving begins at the moment of departure, begins even with the pilgrim's declaration of his intention to take the journey. As the deafening noise of where we came from recedes, the music of where we are going comes more and more clearly within hearing. The destination is absolutely essential to the transformation. Otherwise the pilgrimage would be mere tourism.

But the transformation is not waiting at the destination like a Christmas present sitting under the tree at grandma's house. As I have seen in my own life, it is opening to the pilgrim again and again, all along the way. And again unlike a Christmas present, these openings are not about making us happy, but rather, about experiencing a sense of fulfillment that makes happiness seem like very thin soup by comparison.

The other important paradox about pilgrimages is that although they require a tremendous amount of inner-oriented work, it is work that cannot be done alone. The inward focus can be made valuable to the individual pilgrim only if shared with a community that shares his commitment to the destination and the journey. A journey toward wholeness is inherently, thoroughly communal. Paradox of paradoxes, it turns out that a whole herd of camels has a

better shot at getting through the eye of the needle than a lone ranger camel off on his own. But they have to be the right camels.

So. A spiritual quest by a mutually supportive community determined to find a place they have never been, rather than staying at home; a community prepared to undertake a difficult journey to do accomplish that. The word that comes to mind to describe such a venture is caravan – not a term used very often to describe a church, but I think it is fitting.

The caravan raises as many questions as the decision to take the journey. How will it give structure and effectiveness to the pilgrims' progress toward their destination? What spiritual practices will it practice? How will it be organized? Who will be in charge? How will people join and leave it? Most important, what would you want to know about the people with whom you might collaborate in this caravan? What values, aspirations, and beliefs would you want to be sure are shared by all those joining the venture?

I know some of you are thinking, "it's 11:57. This is a heckuva time for him to be asking questions like this." I know you are thinking, "these are 11:30 questions, not 11:57 questions." And that's pretty much the conclusion I came to on Friday morning. Sitting there in the Great Dismal Swamp of sermon overload, I realized I had to split the Baby of Unmanageably Large Worship Themes, using the Scalpel of Liturgical Restructuring.

We will take up these caravan-related questions next week. Fortunately, nothing is scheduled for next Sunday anyway. That's right. The published worship theme for December 9 – it's right there in your Wake-up call -- is about nothing in particular – the particular question being "is nothing sacred?" And of course nothing is very sacred. I might even say that there is almost nothing more sacred than nothing. But the Frozen Tundra of Nothingness is a vast territory we will have to explore later.

For today, I hope we have gotten far enough to show that for the kind of religion I'm describing, Jefferson was very wrong. [PAUSE. LOOKING UP AND AROUND THE SANCTUARY] There. See? Nothing bad happened.

If you think of your neighbor not as someone who merely sits in the same sanctuary with you from time to time, but rather, as someone with whom you are about join a caravan embarking on a difficult journey from the edge to the center, then it does matter, terribly, whether you neighbor says there are twenty gods or no God. For you and your fellow travelers to embark as spiritual strangers, lacking a common language and core of basic beliefs, would indeed pick your spiritual pocket and leave your soul impoverished. And it would break the legs of every traveler and every camel in your caravan.

Sensing that this surely is enough disquiet to stir up for a single Sunday, I say Amen.