

Not All Who Wander Are Lost  
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Delivered at Northwest Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Atlanta GA  
June 28, 2009

**Opening Words:**

In the words of Libbie D. Stoddard

"We gather together": familiar words to many of us.

"We" -- called here not by name, not by special invitation -- but we who are here, who, walking by the door, come in; who come anonymously, burdened and borne by our visions, yearnings, despairs, solitudes.

"Gather" -- called here not by law, not by outer compulsion, but by inward necessity do we come, alone or with others, casual, yet intent; drawing in, drawing toward, drawing near.

"Together" -- this is the hardest, the most difficult thing -- for within and without this building and this room we irk, frustrate and anger each other at least as often as we lend or give support.

"Together" is a place; "together" is a way; "together" is a focus: an acknowledgment that we who gather are seekers and are equal in our seeking.

Come Let Us Worship Together!

**Chalice Lighting:**

We light this chalice in honor of the many paths that have brought us into community today, let this flame be a beacon of hope and clarity that may light the journey ahead.

**Children's Story:** Oh The Places You'll Go, by Dr. Seuss

**Sermon:**

There are many types of pilgrimages and turns that we take in life, some are thrust upon us, some we wander into, and others are chosen by long deliberation. You might perhaps be familiar with a little hobbit by the name of Frodo Baggins and a pilgrimage he embarked on by necessity in J.R.R. Tolkein's *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The title for this sermon, *Not All Who Wander Are Lost* was picked from a quote in that book. The wizard Gandalf had left Frodo a letter that was to guide him away from peril, yet the note was not delivered in time. The advice in the note itself, as with many guideposts and signs in life, was also obscured in mystery.

"All that is gold does not glitter, not all those who wander are lost; the old that is strong does not wither, deep roots are not reached by the frost. From the ashes a fire shall be woken, a light from the shadows shall spring; renewed shall be the blade that was broken, the crownless again shall be king."(J.R.R. Tolkein's *The Fellowship of the Ring*) Now after reading the Lord of the Rings trilogy and seeing Hollywood splash it out on the silver screen some of that might make sense.

Yet, modern readers delving into sacred and mythic texts often find themselves in a similar situation as that of Frodo - searching for meaning in not so easily interpreted words. Questions ultimately arise. Is this a universal truth? Does this have a specific meaning for me right now at this time in my life? What was the writer meaning for her original audience? Thoughtful spiritual questioning is not an easily laid out journey. Questioning can often be the start of a new path or a fork from a familiar one.

Questioning might be the beginning of pilgrimage, but you have to be willing to take the first step. Leaving the known behind can be one of the hardest things we do in life. The glimmerings of this are when a baby begins to know her own separate identity - taking stumbling steps into the wide open air. It hurts after the first... the third...the fifteenth tumble – yet after tears are dried there is a drive to move forward. What is the mystery that lies around the corner? We are seeking and curious beings. That being said, there is still a need to cling to the apron between our adventures. Not only do these moments of retreat and comfort give time and space give a feeling of safety, it also allows time to integrate experiences.

Do you have a spot where you go to retreat from the world? Some of us had a spot as a child where we would go when angry, sad, or maybe when we just needed to be alone. When I was at my grandparent's house, I'd hide under Nana's dining room table and write poems or just random thoughts. Peeking through the white lace table cloth, I could perch just beyond the adult conversation and escape my siblings for a while. Sometimes people would lose track of me, and then think to peek under the table after I'd been out of sight too long.. I appreciated that separateness,yet closeness of my

experience. At home, my escape was a bit more elaborate, I'd managed to turn my closet into a spaceship with the help of cutout pictures of planets. Stamps from the Publisher's sweepstakes junk mail were transformed into computer buttons, and I used my sleeping bag to make my getaway a little more comfortable. My mom may have thought it a little strange that her youngest was squirrelling away in closets to write obscure and random poetry and hide from the world sometimes. But, I think she understood what many people do – I needed a place that was my own. Even the bravest adventurer needs time and comfort to regroup.

This very trait might be what leads many of us into a less-than linear path in our life's journey and goals. Not all of us meander to our destinations, faith, and life path. There are some that are ready to seize the day immediately. Going straight from college to grad school or med school, straight on to marriage, kids..straight on. Having arrived at identity and destination in a torrent of focused action and dedication, perhaps the chance to enjoy the journey itself is left behind. Being on autopilot leaves no room for detours or taking pictures at the overlook. I am not trouncing on the common American values of ambition, dedicated focus, and hard work – I am putting in a plug for pacing. I am putting in a plug that life's journey doesn't have to be on a treadmill with fixed speeds and inclines. Find the moments to reflect, to meditate, and to turn your inner eye to the compass that beats in your own heart.

I can imagine that many of us took a pause to have arrived here today. While there are some cradle U.U.'s, a large number of Unitarian Universalists are seekers or refugees from other faiths. Many cradle U.U.'s experience a time away from congregational life in their twenties, seeking out answers beyond the arms of their childhood faith. Some return, some do not. It is the freedom of faith in Unitarian Universalism that speaks most to the truth that wandering does not mean being lost! There is a recognition that no one doctrine or source trumps the value of personal experience and the prophetic voices both present and past. While we seek our individual paths, as a united body of seekers, we recognize the value of questioning as the journey to answering. Without the questions, we wouldn't necessarily know the direction to search. Much like an ocean treasure salvager, we have a GPS and

understand the treasure we seek. It is a matter of searching and honing to the spot of salvage. Also like the ocean treasure salvager, there is an understanding that more treasures lie in the deep. Part of the adventure is the mystery, search, and the ultimate deepening of understanding when the gold of our find sparkles before us.

I grew up in the Episcopal Church, the youngest daughter of an Episcopal priest. Being steeped in the mysticism and beauty of my tradition, I did all the things that dedicated children in my church did. There was Sunday school, confirmation class, acting as an acolyte, singing in the children's choir, and yet my questions became persistent. While the path, creed, and doctrine of the Episcopal church were clearly laid before me, I kept thinking there was more than I was being told. When I studied Greek Mythology in sixth grade that was an incredible eye opener. I found the squabbles and stories of the Gods and Goddesses more personified and true to my experience of life, and it made me wonder why should there only be one God? Why should it be a Father God instead of a Goddess? I was certain that the God that I had experienced was not so mean as to sentence my friends to hell, just because they didn't pray the same way. That wasn't the God that I wanted to worship. My spiritual questions deepened and mirrored my experiences, and ultimately brought me to seminary. My path wasn't linear, though I will own it has been dedicated. Dedication to a deep spiritual seeking has demanded the tenacity to sit in ambivalence, and understand that mystery itself can be an answer.

In my first year of seminary I read *Fumbling: A Journey of Love, Adventure and Renewal on the Camino De Santiago* by Kerry Egan for a Pastoral Care class. The author wrote this self-autobiographical book in the midst of her time at Harvard Divinity School. Like the author, I also lost a parent early and it affected my life's path strongly. Kerry was at a loss what to do with her father's death so she decided to take the summer and go on a pilgrimage. A year after her father died, Kerry Egan walked through the fields, mountains, and villages of Northern Spain to encounter ancient holy sites and "get away from it all." What is entirely human about this account of spiritual seeking is her reluctant understanding that there is no perfect way to reach that point of transition from grief to

wholeness. There is no perfect pilgrim. Walking hundreds of miles could not help her walk away from the grief in her heart. Kerry Egan cast the picture of the pilgrimage when she said:

“On pilgrimage, the road itself is a microcosm of human life, shrunk down to five weeks or so. The first day, the twenty-some-odd miles over the Pyrenees, is birth. It's hard, but you end up in the beautiful Basque country, Navarra, lush green, moist and soft, overflowing with roses and mud. That is life. But then you cross a ridge and enter the *meseta*, the Spanish equivalent of Nebraska, but with no Dairy Queens. It is about 110 degrees every day, flat with few trees, covered in swaying wheat. There is no shade, no flowing water. You slug through this. The white straight chalky road stretches out in front of you, yellow wheat is all you can see on either side, blue sky with no clouds above, and the sun bakes and burns you. You cannot escape it. This is death. Then you reach another set of mountains. You climb over and descent into Galicia. It is even more beautiful than Navarra. Greener. Softer. With this really great white wine they serve in ceramic cups. You didn't think anything could be more beautiful than life, then you come here. And you appreciate it so much more, the green is so much greener, because you slugged through so much yellow brown wheat. The damp air is so much softer because your skin cracked in the dry sun. Your body is strong now; the blisters have become calluses and you can walk forever. You are so happy, so close to the end of the pilgrimage, but you never want this to end. This is the afterlife, Resurrection. But, first you have to get through death.”

Pilgrimages have been enacted by many over thousands of years whether to holy wells and shrines or to hear oracles speak. What has been true of many of accounts of pilgrimages such as those of Kerry's, is that it is not the destination, but the road itself that is the ultimate teacher and experience. In the act of searching for truth and being present in the process – that is when answers and inspiration emerge. Just because you don't know where you are going doesn't mean that you aren't getting somewhere. It is not necessarily in choosing the perfect text, the perfect path, or the right directions that leads you to a destination or to an answer. It can be that short cut that really wasn't one, that taught you something. It can be the not-so-linear path where the bumps in the road wake us up in time to stop the car.

The phrase “not all who wander are lost” referred to a character in Tolkein's books called Strider. Strider was a ranger, who wandered off the beaten path. He did not take the direct route, but the route with the most promise. In story of the Lord of the Rings Trilogy, this ranger ultimately follows the path from his own heart to kingship. This kingship is a recognition of the path to wholeness with his past, rather than a show of power. In recognizing his own sovereignty, Strider trusted that a small little hobbit was perhaps more a hope against evil than any force or great army. In our congregations that is held up as the inherent worth of each person, no matter how small. *The least of these* can often tip the

scale in the direction of hope and transformation. Every voice, every deed can make a difference.

To take the road lesser traveled is not easy. Standing in front a tank in Tiannamen square, standing up for a woman's right to vote, speaking out against torture, and simply the strength to see a different way is difficult. We are called to deep and searching work. We are called to understand that Truth with a capital T, excludes and oppresses those that see a different way. You do not have to have an exclusive faith to have a rich spirituality. Opening the doors to other truths is opening to the possibility of mystery. It is opening to the understanding of finite understanding in a perhaps infinite reality.

When Kerry Egan hiked the dusty, hot roads of Spain in search of truth, she found more than one. To be a pilgrim is to take the road that is rougher, less paved, and rarely has air-conditioning. To be a pilgrim means that the sacred doesn't necessarily reside in shrines and the statues of holy places. Understanding that the road itself is holy is a eureka moment. The process of opening oneself to deeper questions and possibilities is to shed pride and a well-outlined map. The map might be able to get you from A to B, but B might not be the place your heart is calling you. Trusting an inner compass and being open to teachers and guideposts becomes a whole different kind of mapping. It is a GPS of soul work, it is a Google Maps of relationship and examination.

Unitarian Universalists sometimes get accused of having more questions than answers. In seminary I have been often asked how could such a group of different people come together to do any sort of worship? Part of the answer to that, is that we are a community of seekers. Our examination of spiritual life does not rest in one book, idea, or savior. I would ask any Information Technology person if they could reliably and consistently troubleshoot the answer to a computer or network problem with one manual. And just because an IT professional uses many sources and methods does not make that person any less qualified to have an answer. In fact, I would argue that this professional is better equipped by drawing on diverse sources of information and expertise.

Being without creed does not mean that we do not draw lines in the sand or engage in spiritual

depth. Being a UU does not give license to a-la-carte spirituality. We are called to seek meaning and depth in the world. We are called to a responsible search for truth and meaning. UU congregations affirm the seven principles and six sources. Diversity does not mean a lack of depth. There are many paths to truth, and we seek them in community and trust.

The journey can be the destination.

Robert Frost famously said:

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.”

My fellow seekers, adventurers, and occasional pilgrims – let this be a reminder to seek out answers as well as questions. Let this remind us to find the deepening of spiritual practice in the inner and outer paths that we choose to travel.

**Closing Words:**

In the words of Andrew Pakula

There are miles behind you  
And many more ahead  
As you journey on toward wholeness  
May all that is good and true guide your way  
May the joy of love lighten every step  
And the miracle that is life be ever in your sight