

All Who Wander Are Not Lost

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What do the following have in common? A white lesbian couple looking for a safe and accepting community in which to raise their Hispanic adopted son; a young recently married interfaith couple; a grieving mother and her young adult children needing to bury their son/brother following his suicide; a life-long Christian seeking a place to worship her God without hearing that her atheist partner is condemned to hell for his beliefs. What these people all have in common is that their path, their life circumstances and what they were seeking led them to a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

Much of our spiritual wandering is in response to events, a reaction to experiences. Often it seems as if we are herded in a direction, caught up in the flow of a wave towards a shore or out to sea. This does not mean that we do not have free will. It simply suggests that much of the time our choices are more limited than we might realize. The words of the choral piece during the offering - "Whither must I wander?" reflect this limitation. The author did not ask, "Whither **will** I wander," which suggests a certain carefree aimlessness, but "Whither **must** I wander?" (1)

Do not get me wrong. I am not saying that everyone who comes through our doors is lost. And I also am not saying that being lost is a bad thing. Regardless, all who wander are not lost, and all who may feel lost do not wander. A friend of mine describes her spiritual searching this way, "When feeling spiritually lost, I become more focused, more intent on finding what is missing – even if I have no idea what I am looking for or hoping to find." This does not look like wandering to observers. Yet, when she is feeling spiritually grounded, she is much more likely to "wander and roam freely, taking everything in, and probably appearing to others to be wandering.

Using the analogy of taking a walk at night my friend further explains, "When you go out for a walk at night and you use a flashlight to help you see the path, the light shows the way. The flashlight keeps you from getting lost. But what are you missing when you rely on the flashlight? Your focus is only the location that the flashlight covers, excluding all that there is to observe and take in outside of the scope of the light." This example has your focus primarily on what you can see. It excludes your hearing, your sense of smell, and how the ground feels under your feet. If, instead, we walk in the dark with no flashlight, our eyes will adjust to the darkness and we have a chance to see things differently - to take in more of what is before us – outside the scope of any light. And by using your sense of hearing, and smell and feeling, you may develop a much wider picture of your surroundings.

The images in The Black Cat reading is another way of thinking about our spiritual search. Some of us, when lost or feeling a spiritual void in our lives actively seek clarity or renewal of some kind. It can be like going into a dark room with a blind fold on trying to find a black cat – "groping this way and that" certain that the elusive answer is right there if you can just grab onto the tail. We are not always good at taking time from the busyness of our lives to just sit and be. We are not always able to wait in that dark room and let the cat jump into our laps.

With our 3rd and 4th principles we covenant to affirm and promote an acceptance of one another, we pledge to encourage spiritual growth, and we promise to embark on and encourage a responsible search

for truth and meaning. These ideals that we strive towards are what make Unitarian Universalism the destination for so many who at times can appear to be wandering on a spiritual path with no end in sight.

How do we know when someone is wandering because they are lost, because they are seeking something? How can you spot someone in need of a flashlight, a black cat or a sign post to the path towards spiritual grounding? And what are we, as Unitarian Universalists with the diversity of beliefs among us, to do in the face of these questions?

First, let me share my understanding of spirituality in this context. “Spirituality is living our deepest reality, our deepest truth, our deepest value into the world. Our spirituality is the unfolding of who we are.” (2) “To be spiritual is to follow our journey into truth and meaning, to discover the treasure found there and make it visible in the living of our lives.” (3)

Yet, it is not as insular and individualistic as those definitions make it sound. Bernard Loomer, a process theologian who believes the universe and all it contains is always changing and growing, talks about the S-I-Z-E of our soul. He always writes it “S-I-Z-E” to signify the wideness, the multi-dimensional aspect of what he means.

In Loomer’s words, “By S-I-Z-E I mean the capacity of a person’s soul, the range and depth of his love, his capacity for relationships. I mean the volume of life you can take into your being and still maintain your integrity and individuality, the intensity and variety of outlook you can entertain in the unity of your being without feeling defensive or insecure. I mean the strength of your spirit to encourage others to become freer in the development of their diversity and uniqueness. I mean the power to sustain more complex an enriching tensions.”

With this definition of soul, spirituality becomes relational. Spiritual growth is not a linear reaching upward getting closer to god – not a Jack and the beanstalk image of reaching towards the heavens. Rather, it is growth in every dimension – 3-D spirituality. “Unitarian Universalist spirituality nurtures spacious and resilient souls that embrace tensions of our world and propels us forward toward loving one another.” (4)

So, our 3rd and 4th principles – our commitment to spiritual growth and a search for truth and meaning – calls us to acknowledge the validity of perspectives that are different from our own. Living these principles demands that we remain open to new truths, new understanding, new meaning. Truly living our faith in the world, encouraging a responsible search, accepting one another means thinking critically and asking questions but doing so without being dismissive. One can express doubts without being blasphemous or demeaning. Acceptance and encouragement of one another includes being curious without being patronizing. (5)

Our spiritual development involves many phases of being lost and wandering, finding a path and sticking to it for a while and then seeing another path and wondering if we are lost again. It was Cesare, Marquis of Beccaria, an 18th century philosopher and the author of On Crimes and Punishments which condemned torture and the death penalty who said, “People take different roads seeking fulfillment and happiness. Just because they're not on your road doesn't mean they've gotten

lost.” (6) This is perhaps what is most important in thinking about the diversity in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Most necessary when living lives reflective of our 3rd and 4th principles.

And this points to the danger of the flashlight analogy for seeking a path. It is too easy to only shine the light where you want to go – to only illuminate what you want to see. This is true whether you are speaking of your own journey or you are trying to understand the path taken by someone else.

If you are only willing to look at the ways you are similar to others, you are losing sight of the richness, a depth of thinking and believing that makes UUism strong and vibrant. And if you only choose to shine that light on differences, then you are not seeing the whole scene – the whole person in front of you.

One of the dangers of organized religion is that we can become stagnant, or at least comfortable with what we already know and give up the search for deeper meaning. And although it is not always easy to admit – underneath our complacency we are lost at least temporarily. But there can be many paths out of lost-ness – the trick is to find your own – that is what makes it real and authentic.

As Unitarian Universalists we value a responsible search for truth and meaning. We also are committed to encouraging spiritual growth in one another. But how do we concretely live these principles? I think the answer is simple. By communicating – by having conversations about theological issues with an open mind. By letting go of assumptions and agendas and just listening to the heart of the other person. By seeking to be heard and to hear, not to change or be changed.

Remember, the words from our choir today. “Home no more home to me, whither must I wander? Hunger my driver, I go where I must.” (7) The writer is not asking for help or for directions. There is no expectation that someone can make home feel like home again. At most all that is required, however implicit the request may seem, is companionship. The journey, the choice of paths belongs to the speaker alone, “Hunger my driver, I go where I must.”

What I ask of all of you is to not assume someone is lost because they appear to be wandering. And if they are wandering, whether lost or not, do not presume to know the right path for them.

The only way to know for sure what is on the hearts and minds of others is to ask – and the only way to let someone know when you are lost is to speak your truth. And the only way for us all to gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and each other is by communicating – really, really communicating – openly, honestly, respectfully. This congregation is a place where those conversations can happen.

Let It Be So.

- (1) Williams, R. Vaughan, “Whither Must I Wander” from the poem by Robert Louis Stevenson
- (2) Collier, Kenneth W., Our Seven Principles in Story and Verse, Skinner House, 1997, pg. 48.
- (3) Ibid. pgs. 64-65
- (4) Brandenburg, Ellen, Editor, The Seven Principles in Word and Worship, Skinner House, 2007, pgs. 41-42
- (5) Ibid. pgs 58-62.
- (6) Beccaria, Cesare, On Crimes and Punishments, 1764, introduction.
- (7) Williams, R. Vaughan, “Whither Must I Wander” from the poem by Robert Louis Stevenson