

The Long and Winding Road
by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, August 6, 2017

They say it's about the journey, not the destination. I have my walking shoes on today. We are on a journey together, a partnership that will conclude at the end of this church year, with the hoped-for outcome being the calling of your next settled minister.

You, as a congregation have been on this journey for several years. The road has been long. This is the seventh year of transitional ministry for you. The road has been long and winding with some unexpected twists and turns along the way – and maybe even a Laistrygonian and Cyclops or two!

Now, the destination is clearly in sight, 12 months away. From where I stand, it appears that you have every chance of being successful in reaching your goal. Yet, they say it's not about the destination, but the journey, for it is on the journey that lessons are learned and wisdom is acquired. Over the past several years, you have learned about who you are as a people and what your purpose in being is. As the work of your Ministerial Search Committee proceeds, you will learn even more about your identity and what you are called to do in the world.

While your most immediate goal is to call a new minister, there is an even greater destination on the horizon, the one we strive towards as Unitarian Universalists – call it the Promised Land, call it the Beloved Community, or call it the Kingdom of Heaven here on Earth – there is something larger than our individual lives that calls us forward and keeps us moving.

The year ahead promises to be an exciting one and I look forward to being on this part of the journey with you. The destination is in sight, but we are not there yet. So, I need you all to lace up your walking shoes and keep on moving. There's a whole lot still to be done before this time next year when, if all goes as planned, your new minister will arrive and fill this pulpit. Until then, we need all hands on deck.

They say it's about the journey, not the destination. This turned out to be true for my family when we set out on a road trip several years ago. Our plan was to drive to the coast of Oregon with three planned stops along the way. At journey's end, we would have an extended stay – camping on the beach, flying kites, fishing for salmon, and watching for whales.

Instead, the journey took us places we had never wanted or intended to go. Though we eventually made it to the coast – short on time and short on money – it didn't matter for the journey had changed us.

It was as if first the blown oil gasket and then the blown tire had conspired to set us down not on a breezy beach in Seaside, Oregon, but in dry and dusty Twin Falls, Idaho. Our two sons were teenagers at the time. Anyone who has ever taken a road trip with teenagers, or has been a teenager taking a road trip with their parents has some sense of what that's like.

We arrived in Twin Falls with no plan of what we would do there, wet and tired to the bone from having changed a tire on the shoulder of the interstate, in the rain, with traffic whizzing by. It was tempting to hunker down, order in pizza, and watch mindless television in the Motel 6 where we had a room for the night. Somehow, I managed to convince everyone to walk into town instead. After all, we had been sitting in the car all day, and, we were on vacation. We could watch television at home.

So, we set out on foot. Upon crossing the bridge that would have taken us into town, we looked down. There, beneath our feet, was the magnificent Snake River Valley -- deep, rocky, and just begging to be explored. Off to the side of the bridge, we found a trail leading down into the canyon. We decided to take the trail just a short way because the late evening was fast approaching and we hadn't come prepared for a hike.

Once in the canyon, the troubles of the day were forgotten. The beauty of the rocks and the sound of rushing water drew us on. We kept an eye on the sun making its way to the western horizon, knowing it would be mighty dark in that canyon once the sun set.

We were reassured by the presence of a lone hiker on the trail on the other side of the canyon. The canyon was narrow enough that we could call to him for help if needed. He walked quickly and was carrying a rather large bag by his side. We kept pace with him and made a game of guessing what might be in the bag.

Maybe it was photography equipment. Maybe it was hunting gear – a rifle or a bow and arrows. We walked deeper and deeper into the canyon, all the while aware that we were running out of sunlight. Just as we were deciding it was time to turn around, the hiker stopped and put down his bag.

We stopped, too. It was the time of the evening that photographers call the golden hour. Writers and poets call it the gloaming. The glowing light on the canyon walls made us wish that we had brought our cameras. Everything looks beautiful in that light and the canyon was absolutely stunning.

In that moment, the man across the canyon began to play Amazing Grace on the bagpipes he had been carrying. The sound danced through the canyon as the sun slipped over the horizon and turned the sky pink and orange while casting deep shadows over the rocky canyon walls.

They say it's about the journey, not the destination. They also say everything happens for a reason. On most days I doubt that either of these statements are absolutely true. After all, it is the destination that keeps us moving forward.

While it is true that because a blown oil-gasket and a blown tire had to happen for us to have this amazing experience, if blown oil gaskets and blown tires happen for a reason, then so too must cancer and car accidents and devastations of all kinds. While it is possible to learn and grow through hardship, and it is possible that good things will follow, it doesn't always happen that way.

The Universalist in me just doesn't believe that Divine Providence or a God worthy of the name would inflict pain and suffering in order for us to learn a lesson or to earn a greater good. Joy and woe are woven fine throughout our lives, and neither is imbued with a deeper meaning other than what we give it. We are the meaning makers. We take each experience, add it the ones that came before, and in the doing, discover more of who we are, what we are made of, and what we are made for.

My journey thus far has taught me that we are beings of infinite worth, that we are made of stardust, and we are made for love. We are made for moments of amazing grace and we are made of courage to face whatever Laistrygonians and Cyclops we may encounter along the way. As the prolific writer and spiritual luminary Henry Nouwen once said, "You can't see the whole path ahead, but there is usually enough light to take the next step."

My family and I did make it to the beach that summer. We flew kites, caught fish, and we never did see a whale. It was the promise of the destination that kept us moving forward, not just the beach itself, but the friends who were waiting there for us and the memories we would make together.

Maybe they say it's about the journey and not the destination because we are always arriving. We don't stay in one place forever. Life calls us on and takes us to unexpected places. The guru Ram Dass says that "We're all just walking each other home." Home is what waits at journey's end.

We Unitarian Universalists don't all agree about our ultimate destination: whether when we are laid to rest and returned to dust, our bodies taken in by the earth or whether our consciousness is taken up to a celestial heaven or we are reincarnated to experience life again. Personally, I am content to let it be a mystery, willing to come to my life's end and discover what comes next.

Not everyone is comfortable with that amount of uncertainty. When my more conservative and orthodox colleagues want to pray for me because they are worried about the ultimate destination of my immortal soul, I tell them to go ahead and pray, but not to worry, because if they are right and I am wrong, if it turns out that there is a hell and I end up there, they can be assured that many of my friends will be there too, and we will get to work turning it into a heaven, because that's what we do.

We Unitarian Universalists strive towards an earthly destination, one that is within reach in our lifetime: that Promised Land where all are welcome and all are free, that Beloved Community where all are equal and all are worthy of love, that Kingdom of Heaven here on Earth where peace is reality. It is within reach, but we must keep moving.

We know what the Laistrygonians and Cyclops that we are likely to encounter look like. They look like hatred and greed. They look like all the isms – racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. They look like patriarchy and white supremacy. As Cavafy's poem Ithaca says: "you won't encounter them unless you bring them along inside your soul, unless your soul sets them up in front of you." Wherever we travel, the journey is always inward one. Together we find the courage to face whatever structures of oppression we may encounter, the ones internalized within ourselves, and the ones that exist within society at large. Together we find the strength and the stamina to dismantle them, making the way clear for the Promised Land to arise.

Along the way, there will be struggle and hardship. Wendell Berry, in his poem titled *The Wisdom to Survive*, reminds us that: "This is no paradisaical dream. Its hardship is its possibility." True words these, there will be struggle and hardship, and, there will be moments of amazing grace when we are brought to our

knees for the beauty of it all, when we will dance with light and joy, when music will fill our souls as bread for the journey.

They say it's about the journey, not the destination, for each destination is but a way station, a stopping point on the way to something beyond. We know that the journey we are on together, you and I, will come to an end. Knowing this makes our time together even more poignant. We know we must use it wisely.

There's a Buddhist teaching that says the presence of death makes life sweeter. Knowing the end will come focuses us on the here and now, the difference we can make, the love we can share, here and now. Yes, it is about the journey, and, we must not lose sight of the destination, for there is work to do, my friends – important work, holy work, ahead of us, work that will ask much of us. But remember, we are worthy of the task. We are made of stardust after all! We are made of courage. We are made for this journey. We are made for love. We are made to create heaven here on earth. So, lace up your shoes. Keep on moving. The road stretches out ahead. Life calls us on.