

The Journeys
Paris UU Fellowship
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By Denise “Denny” Davidoff

We speak of our lives as The Journey but, really, it's more like intertwining journeys: as an individual, as a religionist, as a citizen. I will attempt to explain my intertwining journeys, to you, and possibly even to me.

I'm going to take a triune approach to this morning's sermon. I have three favorite poems about journeys I want to read aloud and, with reflections following each, Voila!, an address for me to write and you to hear.

First, ever moving, *The Journey* by Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
'Mend my life!'
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.

You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations --
though their melancholy
was terrible. It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.

But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice,
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do – – – determined to save
the only life you could save.

Six weeks ago, Sunday, March 8, I was on a bus that took me from Birmingham, Alabama, to Montgomery and then to Selma where I actually walked over the Edmund Pettus Bridge with 500 other Unitarian Universalists and 70,000 other folks. Speaking of journeys!

I wrote about this journey in a message to the Meadville Lombard family – students, alums, donors, supporters:..

“It was a truly amazing experience. We heard the witness of Unitarian Universalist veterans of the 1965 March. We met and dined with family members of James Reeb and Jimmie Lee Jackson and Viola Liuzzo. We were infused with the passionate preaching of iconic Black clergy leaders of past and present. We sang and sang and sang some more. We went en masse to Selma and solemnly walked across the Alabama River on the Edmund Pettus Bridge.”

The conference was keynoted by The Reverend Doctor Mark Morrison-Reed, author and historian, past parish minister, Director of the Sankofa archive – our UU trove of people-of-color history, and faculty member at Meadville Lombard. Mark is a prophetic preacher and a fine historian and his keynote was stirring, to say the least. Let me read you what he had to say about crossing borders to work with people who are not like us religiously, ethnically, racially, culturally – all those others:

“ It takes a little courage to step out of our comfort zones which we have built into fortresses. It takes some courage because, if we are honest, the unknown is scary. Venturing into unfamiliar settings we may feel off-balance. A situation not

in our control and rules of which we are not certain makes one anxious. Doubt eats at you and that is good and important. Being careful and cautious and hiding our vulnerabilities is not a recipe for change and transformation. Why are we here? Not to celebrate but rather to consecrate ourselves. To be transformed you must commit and engage, and let the awkwardness, anxiety and relationship reach in and change you. You can turn differences into dialogue, confusion into understanding, distance into camaraderie but you have to stop making excuses and engage. You can do that because you have the support of Beloved Community. With community as a resource the feelings of reluctance, sense of vulnerability, the doubts and dilemmas you will face, and ways you will get wounded (and you will) can be transformed and used to heal one's self and the world."

I was traumatized watching the television coverage of Bloody Sunday and its aftermath in Selma in 1965. And I found something solid to do with my anger and despair at the 1968 General Assembly in Cleveland, my first. The very day we arrived, my husband, Jerry, and I were caught up in Fullbac, the white support group for the Black UU Caucus. We found our people.

Actually, the sixties were full of transforming personal journeys for me. I gave birth to my second son. I founded an advertising agency at a time when women didn't do things like that. (The Mad Men sixties.) I became a publicly identified Unitarian Universalist. I became a member of The Unitarian Church in Westport.

Signing the Membership Book in a Unitarian church, CHURCH! was scary beyond belief. It took me six years – Jerry and I and the kids started attending in 1960 and I signed the book in 1966. Why the six year gap? I was deep into a religious and cultural struggle with my father, and, by extension, with all of his and my mother's families, beloved aunts, uncles, cousins, to explain what they saw as my betrayal of them, to reject the faith of my forefathers (remember, this was the sixties, when *forefathers* was the lingua franca), not just my grandfathers, Louis Taft and Harry Zuckerman, who had emigrated from Ukraine in the 1890's, but those other forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. How could I tell my family what drew me to this new faith community and what would I tell them? I did not have the vocabulary at that time to even begin to explain the stifling bonds of patriarchy I felt sitting in the synagogue pews and reading the prayer book. The word *patriarchy* was unknown to me. How could I express the feelings of exclusion and put-down I later came to recognize as feminist sensibility?

And that first General Assembly, 1968 in Cleveland, the start of what we now call “The Black Power Controversy” and also the start of my personal Journey Toward Wholeness – a lifetime of learning about and dealing with white privilege, dominant culture, rampant injustice, cultural misappropriation, the Doctrine of Discovery, FERGUSON...the list and the journey goes on and on and on.

In the fall of 1971, I was asked to join the search committee that would find the successor to Constance Burgess, the legendary Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation who was turning 65. It was the first time I was asked to serve in the larger UU world, beyond congregation and district. The UUWF of those days had a large staff, occupied a large space – pretty much the entirety of the Eliot House behind 25 Beacon Street – and a very large membership made up of Women’s Alliances out of our pre-merger Unitarian structure and the Universalist Women’s groups which were, inexplicably, called Units. I resisted at first. My father had died suddenly in October and my only brother had succumbed to galloping melanoma five weeks later, leaving two children, a pregnant widow, and my unconsolable mother. Jerry pressed me to take advantage of the divisionary aspect of this assignment so I said “yes”. Connie turned out to be a very tough act for anyone to follow. Obviously, my father and my brother were irreplaceable. What a journey of grief and discovery that was! Sometimes it seems that things will never be right again. But you all know that about the lives we live, personally and institutionally.

Rev. Mark DeWolfe wrote “Sing out praises for the journey, pilgrims, we, who carry on, searchers in the soul’s deep yearnings, like our forebears in their time. We seek out the spirit’s wholeness in the endless human quest.” Mark was the first openly gay UU minister to be settled in a congregation. He died, way, way too young, of AIDS. He was in the early stages of a brilliant career in ministry. All who knew him miss him still.

“Stand we now upon the threshold, facing futures yet unknown. Hearth behind us, wayside hostel built by those who knew wild roads. Guard we e’er their sacred embers carried in our minds and hearts.”

Second poem – Cavafy’s brilliant *Ithaka*:



As you set out for Ithaka
hope the voyage is a long one,

full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope the voyage is a long one.
May there be many a summer morning when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you come into harbors seen for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind—
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to gather stores of knowledge from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you are destined for.
But do not hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you are old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

If anyone had suggested to me ten years ago that, at age 83, I would be (a) employed by (b) a Unitarian Universalist seminary, in (c) Chicago, (d) as a development professional, i.e., fundraiser, I would have rolled my eyeballs and questioned the sanity of the person making the suggestion. I mean, that was serious craziness on any number of premises!

Eleanor Roosevelt wrote, “Somehow, we learn who we really are and then live with that decision”

I think I have backed into most of my business and volunteer life. Finishing my junior year at Vassar intent upon writing a senior thesis on some aspect of the 1952 presidential campaign, I turned down an attractive internship with Youth for Eisenhower, the idealistic “I Like Ike” movement, for a chance to intern with the Women’s Division of the New York State Democratic Committee. (In those days, need I remind you, women’s campaign work was done apart from men.) Talk about Laiystragonians and Cyclops, I got to see Tammany Hall live and up close, the real guys in the real smoke filled rooms, and, as a page for the New York delegation, got to navigate the Chicago stockyards convention hall, hear Adlai Stevenson’s soaring rhetoric, see Mrs. Roosevelt in person for the first time, sneak off with most of the people my age to attend the ultra liberal Senator Hubert Humphrey’s caucuses every time his band played “Minnesota, Hats Off to Thee”.

In 1967, I became an entrepreneur - largely by mistake. I was fired from my job as Executive Vice President of a small Connecticut advertising agency for being an uppity woman and, spurred on by the agency’s clients, mostly politically conservative, middle aged, white, male, bank, insurance, and utility company presidents, and my husband and brother, both lawyers, both feminists before we had a word for it, I founded my own agency one week later. And took 90% of the clients with me, thus earning the “Advertising Man of the Year Award”, aka successful pirate, from my professional colleagues in 1968.

As I’ve already stated, back in 1968, at that General Assembly in Cleveland, Jerry and I became very involved in FULLBAC, the white support group for BUUC, the Black UU Caucus. But, trust me, it was Jerry’s talent at strategy and seeming ability to have memorized Roberts’ Rules of Order that was the attraction. I was strictly Mrs. Davidoff.

It was at the GA of 1971, at The Washington Hilton, that I went to a mic for the first time, at the urging of Mary Lou Thompson, the Associate Director of the UU Women's Federation and, like all of the UUWF staff, an early and fiery feminist. Mary Lou taught me the art of noticing out loud and at full throat. So, on a point of personal privilege, what I noticed in 1971 was all the old (I was 39 so 55-60 was old) white guys who were running the UUA from the platform up front. It was quite a debut.

You get my drift. Ithaka has given me a wondrous journey.

Third poem. This one written by Rabbi Rachel Barenblat of Lexington, MA, who blogs as the Velveteen Rabbi dot com.

BECOMING/Sh'mot

But Moshe said to God

Who am I to go to Pharoah?

And God said

I will be with you

I am becoming who I am becoming

it is time for you to do the same

everyone else walked right by

but you saw the miracle burning

Pick up your staff now

and make yourself ready

The journey ahead is long

and generations will comb their stories

to learn how you tied your shoes

and how to lead the people

with compassion and with vision

as you are about to do. .

The Reverend Tom Schade retired in 2012 from parish ministry after serving for thirteen years as associate minister at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester. Fortunately for Unitarian Universalism, Tom has taken up active blogging under the title “The Lively Tradition”. He has written these words:

“Ministers often talk about their ‘call’, the time that they became conscious of the deep motivations which led them to the ministry. You have to recognize that the phrase, “the call” is theologically loaded. It remembers the call stories in the Bible, in which God calls people into His service. But people who are not into that concept of God still have deep motivations toward the ministry, and further, can often recall moments when they became aware of them: an experience which could be named a “call”.

My personal journey”, Tom continues, “ is one of amazement. Simply put, I am amazed by who I have become while living my life.”

Yes, Tom Schade. Me, too.

Meadville Lombard Theological School is an amazing religious learning community. We have been educating ministers since our founding in Meadville, Pennsylvania in 1844. Today, from offices and classrooms overlooking Grant Park and Lake Michigan beyond, we are training women and men to lead, to heal, to prophesy, to guide, to cross borders of race and gender and ethnicity, to comfort and, yes, to manage Unitarian Universalist congregations amidst almost unimaginable 21st century sociological complexity. We are asking these women and men to understand Unitarian Universalism, to reimagine Unitarian Universalism, to promulgate Unitarian Universalism, to save Unitarian Universalism. It is holy work, for sure.

As we fully face the challenges of keeping existing congregations healthy and thriving in an increasingly post-denominational culture, new ministers are asked to bring news ways of thinking and new ways of acting to the faith communities that hire and/or call them. Our cutting edge, low residency, technology infused three year curriculum is designed to provide the dispositions, skills and knowledge needed for today’s (and tomorrow’s) ministries with specific emphasis on the practices that cultivate cross-cultural and multiracial leadership.

Who knows if this unexpected turn in my professional and Unitarian Universalist life is the end of my journey. Not I, for sure. I'm waking up every morning with gratitude for the opportunity to be on the ride, determined to save the only life I can save, becoming who I am becoming, appreciating Ithaca's magnificent journey.

So, how are your journeys going? The one you've carefully mapped out, the one thrust upon you by the fates, the one you're traversing as a member of this Unitarian Universalist covenanted community?

In this regard, I offer the Rilke lines I often use for meditation:

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

"Stand we now upon the threshold, facing futures yet unknown", Mark DeWolf told us to sing.

I wish you courage in the wild night, stores of knowledge gathered on the voyage, compassion and vision as a leader, love for and living in the questions. *"To know the universe itself as a road – as many roads – as roads for traveling souls."*

So may it be.