

## REFLECTIONS ON A JOURNEY

A sermon given by the Reverend John H. Nichols

It was just the second day that we were newly minted hospital chaplains. We were looking forward to another comfortable day of orientation and donuts, but instead our supervisor said to each of us, "Here are your four assigned wards. Go out there and be chaplains."

We were stunned. That was it? No further training? No more pep talks? No tips on how to talk to patients or doctors? No more donuts. Just go up there and do it! But, it was time. Much of ministry is on the job training with some time for reflection later, and we were now officially on the job.

Somehow I pushed myself into the room of my first patient, who was an elderly man. I introduced myself and asked if I could be helpful to him. He said calmly, "Well sir, I am 86 years old and full of cancer." Just like that. He waited to see what I might have to say, and of course I had nothing to say.

It was the first time I ever met anyone who consciously faced his own imminent death, and I had no idea what to say. I think I tried to reassure him that I would have the chaplain come up and see him, and then I turned to leave. Shutting the door gently behind me, I suddenly realized, "Wait a minute, I am his chaplain,"

By the time I returned to that ward, my first patient had gone home. I was relieved when I learned this, because at that stage of my preparation I was not able to help him. By the end of my internship, however, I knew a few more things. I had studied with Dr. Elisabeth Kubler Ross who was doing her groundbreaking work on the needs of dying people. I now knew about denial, anger, bargaining and depression – some of the phases of grieving a serious loss.

I was ready to get down in the trenches with the recently stricken, but I was not ready to help the first patient I had interviewed. He and I were at different stages of our own journeys. He had apparently made peace with a life in which his own days would soon come to an end

through a wasting disease. And I who was just starting out really, was not yet ready to talk with someone who had accepted that the end of his journey was now so near.

I do believe that each life is a journey during which we learn some things that carry us through our days and we also learn and discard others ideas and skills that don't have the same lasting strength. We learn that horizons we were once afraid to cross are eventually eminently crossable to someone with a little curiosity and a lot of courage. Each horizon crossed leaves us changed. We will never be quite the same again. We will probably be stronger and wiser but probably more careful and a little more cautious about who and what we believe in.

At the start , we learn to walk and talk and ask for what we want, and gradually we learn that we must give up the idea that we can have anything we want just by making a fuss about it. As we discover that not everything is possible we also discover that there are boundaries, which delineate what is right and wrong for each of us. Perhaps every child needs to learn two things couched one way or another. The first is you really are special to your parents. The second is "Get over yourself. You're not that special

When we're young we can become very adamant about what we think is right or wrong for us, but over time we realize that other people have their own boundaries, and we must be as firm in respecting their boundaries as we are about our own. Gradually, very gradually what adults call the sacredness of other people begins to dawn on us. . And when it does dawn on us that all people carry something of the sacred then we cross yet another horizon that slowly changes our outlook on life.

When we reach the point at which we want to compete on sports teams or gain the attention of other people who don't need to like us for any reason, most of us discover -- though I'll admit that some never learn this -- that there are times when to achieve what we want we have to meet the expectations that others have of us. And in so doing we find out that what others want of us is not so unreasonable. We discover

that our lives are filled with other people who really may even have something to teach us.

Somewhere, we discover that every journey – including our personal journey -- has an end. And we call it death. Knowing that death awaits us we also know we do not have forever to achieve what we hope and dream. At some point in our childhood or young adulthood we may have thought we were immortal, but eventually we understand that is not so. And in that understanding life becomes infinitely more precious. At some point, we learn that other people are as complex and vulnerable as we are. It is funny that we hadn't figured that out earlier, but perhaps it took a little more appreciation of the value of each person's journey to make the point clear to us.

What many of us also learn as we get older is that preoccupation only with ourselves is a very dusty lonely road to be walking for the rest of our lives. I certainly remember when as a young man I was besotted with a certain writer of immense novels detailing the glory of the objectivist spirit, a celebration of self interest according to the doctrines of Ayn Rand.

But as time went on, I learned that life does not work itself out that way. Sooner or later we need each other for warmth, support and understanding. This requires that we learn to be sensitive to the hopes and needs of others. We learn this because we know now there will be an end to our journey and we may want some company in approaching that end.

On this journey we discover that it is a wonderful achievement to do some thing well, to have some accomplishments we can be proud of. And a few years later we discover there are people who can do some things better than we can, and it is usually better to let them go to work. And there are younger people who have the energy we used to have – though maybe not yet the same wisdom – and it is wisest to give them our blessing going forward. For what we are learning on this journey -- is that we create the many of the barriers that haunt us – and as our time grows shorter ,we learn how much love is there for all of us in the end even despite our fears and short comings.

Finally we know that throughout the journey we take there are an incredible number of good things that happened to us without our having to do too much to make them happen. There are people who stood by us through good times and bad. Their love and loyalty was particularly strong when we felt least worthy of it. But there were also beautiful days and beautiful moments that pulled on us even when we were beset by the problems that darken everyone's life by seeming sometimes to be bigger than they are.

At the end of our long journey we want to be able to say – as we have heard others say – that we've been incredibly blessed beyond anything we ever thought we deserved. We will all come to that final reckoning – if not with God perhaps then certainly with ourselves.

A long time ago in recognizing the many losses that are a part of each journey I realized that surviving each loss and incorporating some lessons, and perhaps some toughness, into our lives, is an important part of everyone's growth. It's possible that feeling homesick is one of our first losses. And life continues to bring the inevitable number of setbacks that must be faced and dealt with. As my career in ministry progressed I became fascinated with all of this and eventually I wrote a small book of lectures questioning whether our religious movement took losses seriously enough. It was published and many Unitarian Universalists read it.

But I was becoming a Loss Consultant for our denomination and getting calls from all over the country. I was getting tired of loss. I wanted to stop thinking about losses and start thinking about gains. I decided to do a sermon about what happens when people receive sudden wonderful gains along the path of their journey. I found a study done on former lottery winners.

We used to believe that coming into a lot of money too quickly can ruin a person's life. That old suspicion can be true IF the people who receive the money are haunted by the feeling that they really do not deserve it. If they think they do not deserve the money they won, then they cannot spend it out of their lives fast enough. As long as they have the money it rebukes them. It speaks to them of their unworthiness. On the other hand those who won the money, but understood that their

new fortune only meant that they got lucky, and that they didn't have to deserve anything to be lucky, -- they were more able to live comfortably with sudden good fortune.

Then I realized this is the same dynamic that applies to journeys that are afflicted with sudden losses. Those who understood that bad things just happen to some of us without our having deserved them have a much easier time getting over their losses. . But if we think there was some reason for that loss – something we should have done differently—then we will waste important time reexamining the past looking for evidence of the mistakes we think we made that caused us to “deserve” what happened.

I don't know why but we seem to feel responsible for all of the bad things that happen on our journeys. So much do we need this that we will even invent mistakes we did not actually make in order to prove there was a connection between our loss and something that shows we deserved it. On the other hand believing we were just unlucky can alleviate the amount of time that we carry our pain though it doesn't make any loss less painful at the time.

If you were brought up in certain religious traditions this is hard to accept for you were brought up believe that God created a system of rewards and punishments, which explain everything that happens. Looked at in this way a catastrophic earthquake or flood or illness is God's way of expressing displeasure.

A colleague once told me of a time when a Lutheran minister asked if my UU colleague would officiate at a funeral service for a member of his Lutheran congregation. My friend agreed, and in the tradition of UU ministers he set about trying to find some good things to say about the deceased. He found out that the man was sort of grumpy and generally disliked, but he had a very intriguing inner life, had written poetry and kept an inspiring diary. My friend gave the eulogy using these sources. He thought he had done a wonderful job but at the end of the service the congregation filed past him with nary a smile or even a “nice service Reverend.” Which usually means “I slept through the whole thing.”

When all was over he went to the Funeral Director and asked, "What went wrong?" And the Funeral Director said, "You crazy Universalist. Don't you realize that they all hated the man, and they came to the service only to hear the minister declare that he was at that moment boiling in the fires of Hell."

That won't happen here. Rest assured that when you reach the end of your journey we will only say good things about you.

In the book of Job, God tests a good and honest man. The kind of things that happen to Job could only happen in our worst nightmares, and so Job questions God about his bad luck. What did he do to deserve this? God reminds Job that for all of the bad things that happened to him, which he feels he did not deserve, there were many good things that happened to him, and he didn't deserve them either. Often there is no reasonable explanation for how our journeys progress : for what we lose and what we get, but the beauty that comes our way for free and without our deserving it is a large part of life's meaning and its happiness even in the midst sometimes of pain.

At this stage of my journey I will cast my lot with the teaching that what life has already given most of us may be a whole lot more valuable than what we deserve. Yes we have lost and we will lose good friends but did we really deserve to have them or were their contributions to our lives pure gifts, gifts that were given to us without any question of our deserving or not deserving those gifts.

Think about it. Would you really want a world of pure justice in which every quality would be doled out to us in proportion to our own behavior? Drivers who never yield the right of way would never get to make a left hand turn. People who are constantly critical of others would find that others were constantly critical of them. They would never hear a kind word. Those who are taciturn or shy would encounter people who were equally uncommunicative. They would never actually have a conversation. Those who always need to be the center of attention would never find anyone else interested enough in paying attention to them.

Would you really want a world with that kind of justice? Would we really want the world only as kind to us as we are kind to others; only as tolerant of us we are tolerant of others? While we will feel there are folks who fall below our standards, we know full well there are other people whose graciousness to us far exceeds anything we ever thought we deserved.

There is no question of our deserving what happens when a great and unexpected sadness hits us. Probably we didn't deserve it. But the great moments we received of happiness and peace that come upon us – we didn't really deserve them either,

These are thoughts that might not come at all to us if we were not fully aware that our journeys would come to an end – an end at least to life as we know it. And in the knowledge of that end we look at life's gifts with an entirely different level of appreciation.

We of course do not know for sure what is beyond that last horizon. Here are some things we generally must take on faith. Death is either an extinguishing of consciousness without pain or hurt or terror - - just finally peace. Or the final phase of our earthly journey is only the beginning of a longer journey, perhaps another form of consciousness that we cannot yet begin to understand. Many people in the congregations I served have had hints that such a prolonged journey may be real, and members of my own family have had experiences that lead them to believe that death is not an end. That's my faith that our journey does not end. . It does not have to be yours.

The following reading is attributed to Henry Van Dyke and many others. It is possibly the most requested reading I have shared as a UU minister.

"I am standing upon the seashore. A ship, at my side, spreads her white sails to the moving breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength. I stand and watch her until at length she hangs like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other.

Then someone at my side says, "There, she's gone."

Gone where? Gone from my sight. That is all. She is just as large in mast and spar as she was when she left my side. And she is just as able to bear her load of living freight to her destined port. Her diminished size is in me, not in her. And just at that moment when someone says, "There she's gone" There are other eye watching her coming, and other voices ready to take up the glad shout, "Here she comes." And that is dying. .... And that is living.