

Two Roads Converge: On Taking a Journey Together

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Good morning! It is delightful to be with you, starting this week where we will meet one another, talk, share, and imagine how our journey together might take shape in the months and years ahead. Your Search Committee has told you some things about me. I've learned some things about you. Now, we have a chance to start getting to know each other better, to start visualizing our walk together in service to our larger faith.

To start this relationship out on the right foot, I feel like I need to be totally candid. In a spirit of full disclosure, I want you to know that I never intended to be a minister. Now, don't panic! The Search Committee did an honorable job in inviting me to be your candidate, because my intentions have changed over the years and I AM a minister now. One of my goals for this sermon is to tell you something about me and my ministry, by way of introduction, and how my intentions came to change.

Growing up in the 50s and 60s, I knew no women ministers, which may explain why I never considered ministry as an option. Or, maybe it was some of my early experiences of religious leadership.

I remember one Sunday School class when I was about six. We attended the First Presbyterian Church in Salem, Oregon and my mother had dropped me off on her way to the adult service. Our class had been reading Bible stories, and our lesson that day was on Exodus. After all of us young people were seated, we listened to the story of how Moses, a Jew, had come to grow up in Pharaoh's household. Then came the amazing part about Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.

Enthusiastically, our teacher told us that we would have the chance to experience this great story ourselves, because we were going to recreate the escape right there in our classroom. A dozen or so of us kids were led to a pile of old bathrobes and work shirts in a corner of the room. We each got into costume, adults tying scarves around our middles and rolling up sleeves to outfit us as Israelite slaves of the Pharaonic age. We each wore what must have been the traditional headgear of that time – a bath towel draped over our heads and tied with another scarf. Some of us carried stuffed lambs, others had baby dolls, and a few were issued pillow cases stuffed with more towels as burdens to be carried on our backs on our escape from slavery's grasp.

When everyone was ready, a boy was selected to be Moses. Even at six, my heart beat with a feminist fervor, I guess, because I remember feeling angry that a boy got to be Moses. Even at that tender age, I felt that our Sunday School lessons were way too heavily populated with boy stories and not nearly enough girl stories. I wondered what the authors of the Bible had been thinking.

Anyway, we lined up behind this Moses-in-miniature and moved around as a herd through the room. Of course, we eventually reached the "Red Sea," which in our case consisted of all of the child-sized tables and chairs pushed together to form a barrier to our trek. "Moses," with assistance from the teacher, parted the chairs and tables by pushing them aside, and our happy band of escaping slaves scampered through the divide to the other side of the "sea." When everyone was safely through, the desks and chairs were pushed back together again, leaving us Israelites rejoicing in freedom in our new "land," enjoying our "manna", which in our case tasted a lot like graham crackers and apple juice.

Over 40 years later, it's hard for me to remember exactly what my six year old mind made of the epic that day in Sunday school. It does fascinate me that this is one of my strongest memories from over 10 years of Presbyterian Sunday School.

As an adult, the story of the Israelite escape from Egypt is actually one of my favorite metaphors for dealing with life changes. Like the Israelites, I've wandered on my way to find a spiritual home. There have been times when I felt I was in a parched, dry desert, far from any hope of comfort and happiness. I've built and worshipped a false idol or two. There have been other times that felt like a cool and welcoming oasis, a desert respite, where I was refreshed and renewed. (Pause)

Back to my childhood for a moment - I'd like to share another vivid memory that came to me as I thought about writing this sermon. This one involves long, hot summer road trips from Oregon to eastern Kansas to see my Grandmother. While all the trips sort of run together in my mind at this point, I do recall one specific place along that journey where we came to the edge of the mountains in Colorado and begin to descend onto the Great Plains of Kansas. There is a place I remember where we looked out and saw the highway stretching almost infinitely in front of us, straight and unswerving, as if all the way through Kansas to Missouri. It amazed me. I'd never seen a road so flat and straight in my young life!

Some people seem to have lives like that highway. They just seem to know where they're going. They discern their spiritual path and they move on their journey, focused and purposeful, seemingly sure of their destination. Sometimes, I envy them.

Let me share a favorite poem - you may relate to it, as well:

*Robert Frost: **The Road Not Taken** (1920)*

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Thought as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads onto way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

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.

I have chosen a different road. My life has not been by the well-traveled road. My journey has taken me in ways much more like the rural back roads of my Oregon girlhood, up hills and down dales, around corners and over creeks, sometimes paved, but often dusty and rutted. You may know the kinds of roads I'm talking about. The ones where you can't see beyond the next curve; where what's coming next isn't obvious. Like those roads, my spiritual path has taken a winding route, at times leaving me to discover my truth only when I finally find myself in the middle of it.

We are assured by **Lord of the Rings** author JRR Tolkien that "not all who wander are lost." Since I joined the community of Unitarians, I've met many others like me, people for whom the path to spiritual awareness and wholeness has been more winding than straight. A road less traveled. Perhaps that's true for you, as well.

As a young adult, I once had a conversation with my mother about the doubts and concerns I felt about being a Presbyterian and calling myself a Christian. I was no longer sure I accepted the doctrine of the trinity or the divinity of Jesus. I no longer believed that or the other supernatural aspects of the Christ story. I struggled to find my integrity, unable to repeat creeds that no longer were true for me.

It was painful to find myself at this crossroads, this point of divergence, of belief. I knew my mother was faithfully Christian, and I also knew her to be a rational person who would hear me out. After listening to me pour out my confusion, my mother gently said, "Honey, perhaps you should go try the Unitarians. You might feel you fit in better with them."

I wish I could say that I listened to her and immediately went to join the local UU community. Perhaps it would have saved me some amount of pain and frustration, or shaved years off of my wandering around and trying to find my own way in faith.

But life isn't about the choices we didn't make, it's about living with the choices we do make. I took a different road. I didn't actually get involved with Unitarian Universalism until I was nearing 40 and met my husband, Carl. He'd been an active UU for two decades and told me if we were going to be a couple it was important to him that we find a spiritual community together. So, we began to attend our local UU church. Who knew?

In the 20 years between that conversation with my Mom and actually finding Unitarianism, I explored my spiritual path individually, finding my way by trial and error, but always with a great deal of curiosity and openness. I experienced and learned so very much by wandering around, by occasionally making good choices and sometimes poor ones. I learned things on my own and experienced things in relationship with others. For all of us, I think, there are times in the process of life when we pursue our path alone and times when benefit by being part of a communal journey.

While on my quest, I've found time in community to be important as a crucible for my spiritual development and growth. There's only so much you can know about yourself, in isolation. There are just some spots you can't see. It takes seeing yourself in the reflection of another's experience of you to get a glimpse of the full picture. Others have to be there to hold up the mirror, at just the right angle, so you can get the details as well as the big picture. Sometimes they help you see the positive aspects of yourself that you've simply not seen. More likely, they help point out the rough spots – the not-so-pretty aspects of yourself that you sort of hope no one knows about.

Did I mention that I never intended to be a minister? Well, one day about 8 years ago, I was sitting at my desk at work. I was an organization development consultant for a large corporation in San Francisco. I really liked my job. I'd finally achieved a level of "success" I'd hoped for – a great job, great pay, and great opportunity. I was sitting pretty. At least, that's what I thought.

But that day, as I listened to my colleagues discuss the latest book on leadership theory or change management or something, I heard a Voice in my head say, "I don't care." That's Voice, with a capital "V." I tried to ignore it because I knew what it meant - my life was about to change, again. I said back to the Voice - "Okay, so I don't care about this anymore. If I did care, what would I care about?" The reply? "Well," said the Voice, "there's that ministry thing you've been trying to avoid." What I wanted to avoid was any more of this conversation! Then I realized, well, YES, there IS this ministry thing.

Frankly, it took me awhile to get to the point where I could imagine myself as a minister. Having not lived an entirely virtuous life, I wasn't sure I was "minister material." Tentatively, I shared my potential career plan with friends and loved ones. To a person, their response was affirming, "Oh, yes! That's a great idea. It's so right for you." My community, it seemed, knew more about me than I knew about myself! (Pause)

There is dynamism, a tension, between individual practice and participating in community. I learn things, then I need to go try it out with others to see how it works in the "real world." We need both time alone and time with others, because both contribute to our development as human beings. While time alone for reflection is important, it is in community that we find support and feedback, encouragement and a place to be of service. Choosing positive communities in which to participate spurs me to learn more, expand my thinking, experience more, and live life more fully.

Now, certainly, there are also communities that will help reinforce bad choices. Twenty years ago, when I was still drinking, there were plenty of people around. I had "friends" who colluded with me in being miserable and in encouraged me to stay that way. While I was around these other people in those dark times in my life, mostly I felt alone – utterly and completely alone.

When I started to attend a Unitarian church and learned the Seven Principles, I felt I'd found a true spiritual home, a place where I could be in community with like-minded, and open minded, people of faith who share my values and commitment to creating a just and equitable world. Unitarians understand about taking a different road. Our Principles speak to the covenant we affirm for being together on our life journey. The Unitarian communities in which I've been involved have been places where I felt I could show up and be embraced for who and what I am. In this movement, I've been encouraged and supported to make positive choices while walking hand-in-hand with others on life's journey. As a minister, I'm committed to creating and nurturing this kind of community

T.S. Eliot wrote that "what we call a beginning is often the end and to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from." For both this congregation and for me, this new beginning is marked by endings as well as possibilities. My journey has brought me to this congregation, at this time, to be with you. The two roads of our

lives have converged. Now, we begin to consider taking a path together, teaching and learning from one another.

During this important week, I look forward to the opportunities we have to show up and be fully present with one another. I want to hear what has heart and meaning for you, about this beloved community, in your life, on your spiritual journey, and in planning for the future of this congregation.

As we are with one another, it's valuable for us to speak our truth, not only about the challenges we've faced, but also about our wishes, strengths, and hopes. As we think about our future together, it's important for us to develop plans. It's also crucial that we be willing to open ourselves to the unfolding mystery of life; those marvelous possibilities we may not even imagine today, but are waiting to greet us in the not-too-distant future.

As Unitarians, we covenant to encourage each other on our spiritual paths. I eagerly anticipate sharing our stories and being witnesses for each other. Let's go forward together and see what waits for us around the next bend. Blessed be.