

Letterboxing: Getting Lost and Found in the New Year

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Beacon UU Congregation

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First, you'll need to find the Biddle Building on S. Braddock Ave in the Regent Sq. section of Pittsburgh, and park in the lot next to the Frick Park tennis courts. Then, locate the trail sign that says Braddock Trail. Facing the sign go left or south down the trail. Stay on the main path. Walk until you get to a paved road.

Cross the road and continue on the path. Follow for about 100 yards from the road around a sharp bend in trail. There is a drainage pipe sticking out of rocks below right side of trail.

A little further up the trail on the left side of the path you will find a double tree with gnarled roots. With your feet standing on the path, put your back to the double tree and walk 20 paces into the woods. Look for the tall solo standing tree on the edge of the hill. On the back side of the tree look down and you will find what you seek.

These are the clues for the *East Ridge* letterbox, placed in Frick Park on May 14, 2005 by someone who calls herself "Pink Cat." The box is actually a sealed Tupperware container. Inside is a Ziploc freezer bag holding a small journal, several writing implements, a stamp of a sassy cat face and a stamp pad with shocking pink ink (no surprise there, Pink Cat!).

I recall my goofy joy in finding my very first letterbox that day, in the fall of 2012. I lay my jacket on the ground and sat down on it, cross-legged, next to the tree. I stamped my little letterboxing journal with her cat stamp and noted where I found the box and some personal reflections on the day and the experience.

I lifted the journal out of the bag and was moved to read the many touching entries, dating back to 2005, some funny, some poignant, some lonely, some zesty, some simple and sweet.

The stamps that accompanied the entries were equally diverse and quirky – alter egos or symbols of the person we perceive ourselves to be, the one we'd like to show to the world, but don't or won't. Who knows what these individuals can or will share about themselves in plain sight, because that is so much harder to do.

I wrote my own entry in the book, stamped it with my stamp of a bird covered in poetry text (no surprise there either, eh?) and placed it back in its hiding place.

The East Ridge box is one of more than 100 boxes in Southwestern PA alone. According to the Letterboxing.org website, there are 197 in Arizona and it appears that nearly half of them are in Coconino county. One called "Aspen Grove"

is hidden off Forest Road 151...another dubbed “Soar Into Spring” is nestled under pine needles in Foxglenn Park. Maybe we’ll get a gang together and go searching when the weather warms up and the snow clears.

Throughout the world (especially in Dartmoor, England), there are virtually thousands. Letterboxers like me, are heading into the woods or onto the moors, into the desert and up mountainsides, clues in hand, journals and stamps and pens in tow; orienteering our way to hidden treasures.

One thing I love about this hobby, which dates back to the 1850’s, is that boxes are *hidden*, (or “planted” in letterboxing jargon) not buried. An important distinction. You have to work to find them but the process doesn’t exhaust you. The pursuit is not meant to frustrate you or make you feel stupid or small.

No wonder I saw a sermon in this years ago! Like so much in our human lives, what we seek can be hidden, or at least obscured, by branches of fear or rock piles of regrets, twists in the road we had not expected or fuzzy self-awareness.

And especially in early January – during the annual *resolutionpalooza*, let’s add -- too many unrealistic “expectations.” Hmm - “expectations,” or what one of my witty and wise colleagues calls “pre-meditated resentments.” As a result, we can get even more lost when we yearn to be found. And we can make ourselves feel small or stupid in the process.

The productive, spiritual practice of getting lost asks us to take risks, to meander off the beaten path, to “continue” in the poetic parlance of Maya Angelou.

Getting lost with intention requires that we order our steps with what we consider moral or just, and to pay close attention to clues that lead us into the woods (sometimes dark or shadowy), on to places of discovery, and ultimately, into a dappled clearing.

Another aspect of letterboxing that especially appeals to me is that it take place in the woods – my favorite environment. The woods are a natural place of beauty and serenity and landscapes that often harmonize with one another gracefully - drumlins and ponds and stands of hardwood trees; beaver dams and high hawk nests.

The forest has also served in lore and legend and dream psychology and on Broadway as a metaphor for the unknown and the subconscious. I read that if you dream about heading into the woods, this may suggest a need to open yourself up to discovering your potential and your instinctual nature. To dream that you are walking through the woods may signify your return to an aspect of yourself that is innocent and spiritual. If you are walking out of the woods, then the dream may be a literal depiction of being in the clear of some situation.

To dream that you are lost in the woods may indicate that you are starting a new phase in your life. And, you may be expressing some anxiety about leaving behind what is familiar to you. This final interpretation – the one of being lost in the woods - is the most hopeful, I think – the notion that you are embarking on a new phase, even with the inherent anxiety. Yet, heading into the unknown, trusting our instincts, and drawing on inner resources to find our way through, takes sustained effort beyond the enthusiastic, well-meaning January resolution adrenaline rush. This becomes all too apparent when we find ourselves, not slightly off the trail, but painfully lost in the glades.

The Hindu poet, Srimad Bhagavatam alludes to this in his poem, entitled, “Lost in the Forest of the World.” “We go round and round in the forest,” he muses, “unable to find our way out, until some kind traveler, some mahatma, reveals it to us.” As I’ve often preached, I’m here, as a fellow traveler, not as a “mahatma” but as a minister, to shine a flashlight on the path so that my companions don’t trip quite so much. We may get a little lost but not beyond rescue and eventually, I believe we will be found, individually and collectively. And, as Bhagavatam reminds us: “May we each carry a lamp into dark places, for we too, have been lonely and without a light.”

I suspect many of us have experienced hard times when we literally could not see the forest for the trees. We’ve gotten lost in addictions or distractions or our own narcissistic bubbles. Perhaps, we’ve lost our way in long-standing, embedded beliefs about who we’re supposed to be or how life is supposed to go. We find ourselves deeper into the woods, so far off the trail that it’s hard to find a blaze or a clue that could get us oriented back towards our true North.

Addictions and self-absorption and meanness and emotional disconnection are clues that we have in fact, gone off course, and need to pay attention. Too often, the way we deal with the recognition that we are lost and attention must be paid is through making of those well-intentioned New Year’s resolutions.

I had considered calling this January 5th sermon, “Deeper not Different,” because it’s nearly impossible to become a completely different person, no matter what we resolve. There are no personality or temperament transplants that I know of. Sometimes we get lost in the belief that we will wake up “different” because we do 100 crunches every day or stop eating a particular food. Better health habits, kinder behavior, safer housing, more money or a new partner can improve our circumstances and relieve pressure. Yet, in the light of day, we are still us.

Other times, we can get lost in the idea that volunteering four hours per week or focusing more on our important relationships will magically expunge our flaws and make us virtuous. These actions can and do deepen us, for sure, and if we set off into the woods to be deepened, not different, then we are more likely to get found in authentic and lasting ways (much like the doll in our tale about Kafka and the little girl). To be clear, I'm all for resolving to go deeper in the manner I just described. However, I'd recommend that we reframe that list as ways you feel lost now and where you'd like to be found in 2020 -- not just geographically, but in mind, body and spirit.

Woody Guthrie scrawled 33 resolutions by hand in January of 1943. (and the fact that his name is Woody is only a happy wondrous coincidence here!)

He calls them "rulins" and they cover the gamut from the reasonably doable to ambitious. Our own lists may even include some of Guthrie's intentions. It starts with practical items and then morphs into the personal. 1. Work more and better; 8. Write a song a day; 9. Shave and wear clean clothes – look good (later on, we have companion items to this – wear clean socks and take bath);

14. Listen to the radio a lot; 15. Learn people better; 17. Don't get lonesome; 19. Keep hope machine running; 27. Help win war, beat fascism; 31. Love everyone; 32. Make up your mind."

I wonder what 1944 was like for Woody and how many of these "rulins" he was able to manifest in his own journey into the woods and out again. 1944 was the year he recorded *This Land is Your Land*, so #25. "Play and sing good" seems to have worked out. Don't ya just love #15." Learn people better?" I do.

I think Guthrie would resonate with my favorite personal mantra (from Dr. John Gottman) – "Small things often." Did you notice that letterbox clues are doled out in small portions? Pink Cat instructs us: "Facing the Braddock trail sign, go left down the hill; look for a solo standing tree; and walk 20 paces," and so on. Getting found in the forest of the world requires small things often, rather than big, sweeping, dramatic changes. What might be your intentional "small things often?"

My colleague Victoria Safford navigates her own ongoing journey by paying attention to those small moments when she had become lost and those when she had been found, primarily by allowing herself to be vulnerable, awake to life and to her location in the forest of the world.

"Here's where I found my voice and chose to be brave," she confesses in the reading we heard earlier. "Here's where I was once forgiven, was ready for once in my life to receive forgiveness, and to be transformed. Here's a time, and here's another, when I laid down my fear and walked right into it; Here's where cruelty taught me something; Here's where I was told that something was wrong

with my eyes, and where I said, “Yes, I know, I walk in beauty.” And here and here and here and here...these are the landmarks of conversion.”

Safford models for us a willingness to be vulnerable. Getting found asks us to be vulnerable in allowing others to know us, vulnerable in becoming visible and known to ourselves and to them, like a letterbox, lifted from behind a tree stump and brought out into a dappled clearing.

The spiritual journey isn't always one of seeing in real time, but about paying attention in the present, and the eventual arrival. Remembering this helps me when the path is obscured and the way forward is murky.

How do you want to get found this year? How might you resolve to become deeper, not different? As you move along the trail, you'll need to pay attention and you'll need to leave clues for yourself and for others, doled out in small portions, just beyond a fallen log or beneath an old stonework bridge. There, you will find what you seek.

This weary, wonderful world needs your stamp. What impression would you like to leave, hidden in plain sight, for others to find, here and here and here and here, in this forest of the world?

Blessed be. Blessed we. Amen.

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