

Barefoot Believers:
On Foot With Moses and Jesus
A Sermon for Easter and Passover
Beacon UU Congregation
April 4, 2021
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My Uncle Moe liked to take his shoes off at our annual Passover Seders. Well, truth be told, he insisted; it was his Seder shtick! We'd all be settled at an archipelago of "grown-up" and "kid" tables arrayed from dining room to living room in his Highland Park house, when he would proclaim, "I'm taking off my shoes."

There would be the obligatory groans and kids would hold their noses, and everybody would laugh. My Aunt Anna would lament, "Oh Moe, really?" And he'd replied, "Well, it was good enough for Moses! Pass the matzoh already." (Side note here- I've hosted many Seders and no one goes barefoot - I presume! That said...)

Uncle Moe had it right. It was good enough for Moses. Or, more accurately, it was more than good enough for Yahweh, Moses' God. As we heard in the reading from the book of Exodus in Hebrew Scripture, Moses encounters the Burning Bush at Mt Horeb, and God calls out to him.

Moses replies, "Here I am" (Hineni), the classic Biblical response that signals that Moses has been chosen as a prophet; we see this pattern repeated with Isaiah, for instance. Yahweh instructs Moses to take off his shoes, for he stands on Holy Ground. Yahweh then promises that with Moses as their leader, He will bring the Israelites out of bondage into the land of milk and honey. The rest of the story is well, Passover. And for the most part, Moses wore sandals along the way; forty years of wandering, much of it in a wilderness.

A famous Jewish joke suggests that the trip would have been shorter if he had let Mrs. Moses ask for directions. But, in truth, the pilgrimage was longer than expected because of the Israelites disobedience on the journey, and in the end, Moses could only stand atop Mt. Nebo, gazing across the Jordan at the Promised Land; Joshua would lead them in.

Interestingly, according to Jewish law and tradition, it is preferable and clearly stated that a person walk around with some separation between the foot and the ground (a symbol of earthliness, as opposed to Godliness). Even someone who is required by Jewish law not to wear leather shoes, such as a mourner, should still wear a pair of socks, slippers, or something similar. The importance of wearing shoes is recorded in the Talmud (Jewish wisdom text) "One should always sell even the beams of his house (if necessary) to buy shoes for his feet."

When in a holy environment, however, there is no need to create a barrier between mankind and earth. It is, in fact, recommended that a person go barefoot, so as not to create any separation from the Holy. (metaphor alert!)

The wearing of shoes also plays a role during the preparations for Exodus from Egypt. The Jewish people were required to be ready to leave, including having "shoes on your feet" (Exodus 12:11). Similarly, in the messianic prophecy in Isaiah, it is told that the Almighty "will cause people to cross over (the Euphrates River) in shoes" It was as though Yahweh was saying: Until you arrive in the Promised Land, keep those shoes on. Keep yourselves separated from worldliness and earthliness with your mind on the Holy and your eyes on the prize.

In his very funny and insightful book called The Year of Living Biblically, contemporary writer A.J. Jacobs, recounts an exchange with Mr. Berkowitz, the Rebbe who having previously inspected his wardrobe for forbidden mixed fibers, has moved on to the purity of his shoes. He writes:

"Speaking of shoes, Mr. Berkowitz tells me that you don't just put them on any old way. There's a proper procedure. You put on your right shoe and then your left shoe. Then you tie your left shoe. Then you go back and tie your right shoe. Jacobs deems this "some serious religious micromanagement." However, the incident stirs some deeper reflection in Jacobs about the bigger theme of freedom of choice; actually too much freedom of choice in our society, and he concludes: "I'm starting to see the beauty in the structure, the stable architecture of religion."

Yet when it comes to the architecture of religion, we UU's are not keen on the idea of giving up freedom of choice or thinking. Essentially, we like the freedom within form that defines our way of being religious.; for instance, whether to wear shoes or not. I'm recalling now the conflicting passage from the New Testament we heard earlier, one in which Jesus instructs his followers to bring sandals and in the other, to leave shoes behind. Which is it? Did they have a choice?

According to scholars, Jesus doesn't say "take off your sandals and walk barefoot." That would be folly on the roads of Israel. He just didn't want them taking extra, unnecessary items as they set out on a spiritual journey. And to that, I would wholeheartedly agree. Keep it simple and step lively.

In my view, for us as Unitarian Universalists, it's not an either/or, it's both – By all means, bring your shoes for they are a practical necessity on a pilgrimage, but whenever possible, go barefoot to feel the terrain behind your feet.

Unlike the orthodox Jew who is advised to avoid contact with the Earth because it may lead him astray, I'd advise the opposite so that we might experience all of the physical and spiritual benefits of becoming truly grounded and connected to the path and to the teachings of the prophets we admire.

If we haven't been on the road for long, or we are intermittent pilgrims, it's likely that we're "tenderfoots" in need of some calluses for the journey. But that's okay - you have to start somewhere on a pilgrimage, whether it's a long journey out of some sort of personal wilderness or social bondage, or one deeper and broader into the fertile valley of who you are, what you believe, and where you stand.

My Methodist colleague, the Rev. Jeff Dunn, concocted a plan one Spring to become closer to Jesus, his ministry, and his traumatic experiences during his final days, by walking barefoot as much as possible during Lent. He surmises that going barefoot in his suburban Tulsa environment would be hazardous, so he opts for the next best thing, a pair of \$75 *Ten Toes* shoes. He writes:

"After convincing my toes to go into the right toe slots in these "shoes" I set off on my favorite three-mile walk around a park here in Tulsa. Right away I could tell a difference. It really was like walking barefoot. I could feel the blades of grass under my feet. "I felt lighter as I walked, I felt spiritual, I felt as though I could go farther and faster in this manner. At the 1.5-mile marker, the pain started."

"After an excruciating 3 miles stroll, there were half-dollar sized blisters all over both feet, He concludes: "I did all this for you, just so I could report accurately on what it is like to walk barefoot with Jesus." The Rev. Dunn concludes that he needed to pay better attention to the journey, acknowledge the tender inexperience of his feet, and be less enamored of his shoes. I think he would like this Jewish midrash, or commentary, that asks the question, "why was bush burning, but never consumed?"

The answer, like a Zen Buddhist koan, challenges us to awaken to Life around us and under our feet, "the bush was burning, and never consumed, so that as he walked by, day after day, one day Moses would notice it! Always on holy ground, always in the presence of the divine, always a breath away from his life mission, but utterly oblivious to what he passed by each day...until one day...Moses saw...and the world was transformed, he was transformed. "

This may be true, but I'd suggest, that Faith or deepening spiritually is not about finding the right bush. It's about taking off your shoes (so to speak) and experiencing transcendence through touching, really touching the ground beneath your feet as a barefoot believer.

As Elizabeth Barrett Browning reminds us:

"Earth's crammed with heaven. And every common bush afire with God; But only he who sees, takes off his shoes. The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries." Browning is defining a state of presence and transcendence. When we walk in such a state, we become more fully aware of ourselves. We begin to

wonder and to pose important questions. We reflect on the inexplicable fact of our own, here-and-now conscious existence and what it means to be a person. And when we take this journey as barefoot believers, we might feel and learn from every step and misstep, from the texture of the grass, the dust, the cool water, the hot desert, the hard pavement, and the soft sand.

Believers will walk a long way to be free. It's 1200 miles from Guatemala City to Brownsville, TX. Children are traversing that route, some barefoot and thirsty for water and freedom. How far will you walk or wander? Will you endure thirst, blisters? To find these doors? Find yourself? Find your own idea of salvation or resurrection?

You may be listening to this and thinking, "Goodness, that all sounds way to religious for me." Well, as I've told many a congregant who has explained that he or she is "spiritual but not really religious" : If you are here most Sundays (even virtually on YouTube) belong to any affinity group or serve on a committee, rally for justice, or bake pies for potlucks, I've got news for you – you're religious, you are a pilgrim of sorts and Beacon is your pilgrim's destination. And that's okay. Even better than okay in my book.

I'd add that to undertake a pilgrimage (whether barefoot or shod) is a type of conversion process. (Did she say conversion??) Converting to Judaism is a lengthy learning process; converting to Christianity can be accomplished by accepting Jesus as your savior at an altar call. To be sure, we UUs *are* unorthodox pilgrims and unlike Jesus or Moses, our process is one of conversion to our own paths (as Gandhi so aptly put it).

I'm indebted this morning to the work of my colleague, the Rev. Daniel Simer O'Connell for his essay "How to Convert to Unitarian Universalism (UUism) in Four Simple Steps." He notes that newcomers to our free faith discover fairly quickly that the process of *becoming* a Unitarian Universalist isn't as straightforward as signing a membership book, affirming a creed, plunging into a ritual bath, executing a certain number of bows, or wrapping oneself in a betel leaf. Conversion is about depth, (going deeper spiritually, or going barefoot to use our metaphor this morning) and according to O'Connell, this process can be broken down in four simple (not easy!) steps.

Have you seen *The Simpsons* episode in which Todd and Rod Flanders are playing a video game that enables them to zap heathens and convert them to Christianity? Bart gives it a try and when he asks Todd how he did, his pious little playmate replies, "Nah, you just winged him and made him a Unitarian."

Despite amusing, but ill-informed, jabs like this one, implying that it's "easy" to become a UU because we can allegedly "believe anything we want," the opposite is closer to the truth. It takes real work to deepen along any spiritual path, especially one like ours, without clearly marked directions.

Most religions would claim a similar experience – one of staggering and regaining one's footing on the path. The sage Rabbi Hillel wrote: I get up, I walk, I stumbled. Meanwhile I keep dancing." I like that. What makes our process unique is that when we get lost, we return, not to a unifying creed, but to the very process of "conversion" itself; to the endeavor of always "becoming" ...walking, stumbling, dancing....barefoot or shod. This is the Easter faith of Unitarian Universalism.

Each of O'Connell's four simple steps for "converting" to Uuism (or becoming a barefoot believer) provides a trailhead into this deeper terrain, and surely, each trail could (and optimally, *should*) be explored for a lifetime.

The first simple step asks you to identify your history. We are each born into a world we did not create; to parents we never met, speaking a religious language not of our choosing. And yet, here we are. To plan your journey, you must know where you've been. Understand what it is that you are rejecting, or evolving beyond, and why.

Barefoot believers, will you consider taking off your shoes and taking this journey?

Step two asks you to articulate your theology. Once again, you can do this in an adult faith development course like, "Building Your Own Theology" or "Conversations With the Bible" or Reason and Reverence." We never finish the process, but too many of us never really get started asking the foundational questions, such as: What do you believe about life & death, the divine, spirituality & religious experience, science, ethical living?

Theology is not a dirty word or an alien concept to us. We may not be strongly "theist," but we are certainly theological – pondering questions about transcendence, mystery, faith, and belief. If this calls to you, join a covenant group or affinity group.

Barefoot believers, Will you take off your shoes, bring your coffee, your curiosity, your compass, and your questing spirit?

Step three in your conversion to UUism? Take some spiritual risks. O'Connell explains : "If you don't believe in God, try prayer or meditation anyway. If you don't like being around the poor and destitute, work in a soup kitchen. Push yourself beyond your comfort zone. If you're afraid of death, volunteer in a hospital or nursing home.

If you believe you are not creative, write poetry, paint, or sing. Use your spiritual fear like a Geiger counter, not to stay away from , but to run headlong

towards the thing you most avoid. Such risk-taking will help you grow spiritually and it will shape and season your theology.

Barefoot believers, will you take off your shoes and empower yourself towards new spiritual risk-taking?

O'Connell's *fourth step* challenges each of us to *become an elder*. Often (and understandably), when we first get involved with a church, we need to pay attention to our spiritual needs. (Steps 1 through 3, essentially). I support that.

Many of us come here for the first time, hungry for community or spiritual sustenance, or fresh from or in the midst of crisis. It is right and natural and important to find out how the congregation can serve *you*. But conversion to a depth-oriented Unitarian Universalism cannot simply stop there. Once we identify our history, articulate our theology, and take some spiritual risks, we must become *elders*, regardless of age, gender, or status, and consider the legacy we are building and leaving to future converts.

Barefoot believers, will you take off your shoes and move from being just a spiritual seeker to more than that (someone, I would add, like Moses or Jesus): a creator, sustainer, and nurturer of beloved community, to work to provide a spiritual home for others not yet met, but just like us, potential 'converts' all?"

There are no short cuts or express lanes in our religion. It takes time and intention on the path to convert to this fascinating free faith of ours and to serve as its guardian for future pilgrims. And, in the end, the only person you'll need to "convince" of your "conversion" is yourself.

So, pack your sandals, but take off what "binds" you, barefoot believers, for you are walking, with Moses and Jesus and Uncle Moe, and Rev. Dunn and one another, upon an earth crammed already with heaven, right here in this very room, right down to your toes.

Shalom, Blessed Be, and Amen.

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