

You Were Never Not Coming Here

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Beacon UU Congregation

March 6, 2022

You may find this shocking, but I actually got a bit bored while watching the film “Lord of the Rings.” (Oh my, did I hear audible gasping! Sorry.) What with all the urgent fleeing over mossy hill and misty dale, the constant swashbuckling confrontations with unwashed adversaries, and the seemingly endless collection of sacred objects (the fork of Endor, the shoe of Gandine, the hairclip of Nomac, and so on) I lost interest after the two- hour mark.

Yet, there is a particularly powerful moment in the first hour of the film that has stayed with me, and haunted me, and echoed in my ear, beckoning me towards ministerial reflection, especially today. Frodo Baggins and his har-footed friend, Samwise Gamgee, are setting out on their hero’s quest when they begin traversing a corn field at the edge of the Shire, their Hobbit homeland. Sam stops as Frodo walks on, until he notices his companion at a standstill.

When Frodo enquires about this hesitation, Sam responds: “If I take one more step, I’ll be the farthest from home I’ve ever been.” And they claimed Sam wasn’t too bright! He seems pretty darn observant to me. In his statement, Sam captures the anxiety, the anticipation, the bittersweet sadness, and the excitement of “leaving home,” regardless of whether the “home” left behind is a village, a workplace, a relationship, a family, or a religious identity. Be it temporary or permanent, leaving home pushes our buttons.

Even if we’ve set out on a pilgrimage voluntarily and enthusiastically, at times we end up pulling ourselves along kicking and screaming. Change is hard. Growth can be painful. We get blisters. Our water bottles run low. The unfamiliar is both tantalizing and terrifying. Loved ones don’t relish or easily accept the leave-taking. The quest can be confusing. And goodness only knows what slimy-teethed, stringy-haired brawny foes may be lurking in the glade!

Beacon UU Congregation is a pilgrim’s destination. This morning, we welcome all pilgrims through our open door - members, friends, newcomers, to this vibrant place of seekers. And over the past year, we’ve welcomed dozens of visitors who are now growing in community with us. Like nearly 90% of UUs overall, these newest folk found Unitarian Universalism after a uniquely personal pilgrimage. You’ve found us at the edge of the cornfield, atop a grassy knoll, in

your own backyard, and often after a stint in a dry spiritual desert. Some of you have found this uncommon denomination and this congregation a long way from home, often with surprise and relief, and we've opened our doors (and our YouTube channel) to shelter you, and embrace you, and rejoice.

Think for a moment about your own journey towards this new religious identity. Perhaps you were raised as a Catholic or Jew or Pentecostal or atheist or in an un-churched home. Then, one day, you took that first heroic step and then another until you found yourself here, farther from home than you'd ever been, coming through an open door you didn't even expect to knock upon. You may be in this Sanctuary for the first time this morning, at a crossroads somewhere at the beginning or middle of your sojourn. Perhaps you are thinking what so many before you have thought: "I was a Unitarian all along and never knew it."

Beacon UU is your pilgrim's destination with an open door. I assure you that you are not and will not be traveling alone. We will walk with you, and stumble with you, and get up and walk and stumble some more because the free and responsible search for truth and meaning is an on-going quest beyond many cornfields. Even after we've hung our hats comfortably on the hook of this hospitable and liberating faith, "The road goes ever on and on."

Only you know how dire your quest felt for you as you set out – emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically. You may have been in theological, intellectual, or political disagreement with your childhood faith. Or, you were not accepted for your core gender or sexual identity. Or, you sought community, or the kids required religious instruction, or you were dehumanized in some way, or simply uninspired, needing more, yearning for a deeper connection with others and with the sacred that would feel right to you, feed you, and harbor you.

Jim Fowler, a leading expert on faith development, suggests that most of us travel through six universal phases of spiritual growth in our lives. The quest begins with the *Magical* phase of early childhood dominated by an all-powerful God, demons and fairies, and culminating in the *Unity* phase characterized by a more mature concept of an all-pervasive Ground of Being.

However, Fowler is quick to point out that the seeker's individual journey is "a personal, creative, and undefined one that cannot be outlined by attempted clinical or scientific research." "Religion isn't an instinct," he tells us. "Each person has their own unique way of seeking it, regardless of whether they are two people on opposite sides of the world, or identical twins."

Just such a unique seeker is Andy Hogg, one of our most committed members and leaders. Listening to his heartfelt, grateful testimony and sensing his palpable excitement for our community, I'm recalling Garrison Keillor's gentle humor and unfailing wisdom in characterizing his cherished Lake Wobegon. He

writes, “Paradise found! I said I would and by God I have. Here it is, and it is just what I knew was here all along. I’m happy to be here, is all.” Beacon UU may not be “Paradise” ...and many of you *didn’t* know it was here all along, so far from home...but it is pretty darn wonderful and we’re happy you’re here, too!

Why do folks join a UU church? There is a Bookmark about that with 10 reasons in the seat pocket of the chair in front of you (and on the home page of our website) ... and you are welcome to take that and share it with others. Here are some of the possibilities: We walk through our open door to be reminded of the enduring truths of human dignity and freedom, to be called to service in society. We walk through our open door to find fellowship with a fascinating assortment of feisty individuals, or to participate in a forum for the unfettered exchange of ideas. John (from our reading came, EVERY SUNDAY, because in his words, “someone might miss me if I didn’t.”

We walk through our open door and stay in order to revel in mystery, employ reason, to have a voice, to lift up life’s abiding joys and confront life’s sorrows, to organize for justice. We join in order to nurture our children and honor their creative self-expression. And, perhaps most obviously, we join to be where “our spirits can run free.” We are religious orienteers here, armed with a metaphoric compass, getting East and West bungled up, taking the road less traveled by, getting lost and getting found, punching our tickets at each wayside pulpit we encounter on the journey.

That may sound funky to some people. Even so, Unitarian Universalism is a *real* religion (not “religion-lite”), a bona fide container, despite the harassment you may have received from folks who disapprove of your entry into this free faith. I agree with my colleague, Tom Own-Towle, who calls Unitarian Universalism “the sacred chance,” because it gives us the rich opportunity to share our spiritual lives with fellow travelers who are tied to us by choice rather than by habit.

To be sure, balancing the communal and the individual within our lives as UUs can challenge us free-thinkers, but the effort ultimately rewards us with a mature and spirit-filled life. Those who come thinking Unitarian Universalism will be the path of least resistance because we can allegedly “believe anything we want,” need to read the fine print. Because the opposite is closer to the truth. Unitarian Universalism has roots – it does not spring full-blown from the head of each new seeker who enters our doors. And it takes real work to deepen along any spiritual path, especially one like ours, without clearly marked directions.

Sometimes we end up in the woods, after sunset, without a flashlight.

Sometimes we go off road and happen up wondrous, unexpected clearings and summits. 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 Unitarian Universalism unique is that when we get lost, we return, not to a unifying creed, but to the very process of “conversion” to our own paths. to the endeavor of always “becoming” ...walking, stumbling, dancing. And this is a gift, not a curse.

Ask yourself if you resonate with Elizabeth Gilbert who says this in her popular memoir, *Eat Pray Love*: “But I was always coming here,” she writes, “I thought about one of my favorite Sufi poems by Hafiz, which says that God long ago drew a circle in the sand exactly around the spot where you are standing right now. I was never not coming here. This was never not going to happen.” If you also feel that you were never not coming here, then I hope that translates into a commitment to keep our open door open. Today is the kickoff of our annual Stewardship campaign and there is no free lunch in the free church. With freedom comes fiscal responsibility. Many congregations, UU and otherwise, took a hard hit during this 2-year pandemic interval. Some closed their doors permanently or they are struggling to recoup their membership and momentum.

Here’s a cautionary tale - Years ago, I had regular sessions with a Spiritual Director named Jan who rented an office in a portion of a magnificent historic church in the Back Bay of Boston. Before my first visit, she advised me to “Take the entrance on the left, and wait in the hallway outside the big door.” Got it. When I arrived, I expected to see a “big door” like the type of double doors that we have in the back of this Sanctuary. But, no! This door was humongous. I mean, just gigantic. If I were to guess, I would say 12 feet high and 4 or 5 foot wide. Like the door to the Giant’s house in Jack and the Beanstalk!

It turned out the door, with its elegant and aged fine wood grain, was a leftover element from the original building and when they carved up the “offices” they decided to keep it. Jan’s office was about the same size as the door, by the way. When I asked her about whether it had influenced her choice of offices, she said: “Yes! I loved the idea of a big door for people to walk through when they came to explore some of life’s biggest challenges and possibilities.”

As a minister, I couldn’t help but ponder the circumstances that led this congregation to convert part of its beloved and historic building into offices and an art gallery. It’s not complicated really – they just couldn’t sustain the membership and raise enough money in tithes to keep it all together.

Our building is intact, freshly renovated, and I believe we've done well here at Beacon, we've stayed connected. And we've managed to fund a very lean budget each of those Pandemic-plagued years. This being Stewardship kickoff Sunday, we need to talk about the budget honestly. When people tell me they are offended that we ask for money because we are a church, I wonder where they think we get the funds to pay for the staff, or the electricity, or coffee, or fixing the boiler. It may be that this person is used to a diocese or presbytery or conference paying the bills. Unitarian Universalists cut that chord centuries ago...we walk through the open door together offering our time, talent and treasury, voluntary and with as much generosity as we can, in order to keep the enterprise going, for ourselves and for future pilgrims on the edge of their own personal Shires.

Beacon UU is your pilgrim's destination and if we didn't need or desire "religion," we'd be elsewhere this morning. But we do need and want it, sometimes even enough to walk, stumble and dance beyond the familiarity of "home." We do this because belonging here offers us so much support for life's journey, with its blind alleys, detours, and hairpin turns. We set out because religion helps us to define ourselves, love ourselves, challenge ourselves, regulate ourselves, and measure ourselves by higher standards. It helps us to aspire and act. It grounds in the present; it is what we do now, even under duress.

Practiced compassionately, it involves cherishing the good and the true, and lifting our vision beyond ourselves today on behalf of all of our unborn tomorrows. The Buddhist teacher, Sharon Salzberg, encourages us to pay attention on this path. "Seeing clearly," she writes, "we realize that we have no distance to travel in any direction to find our real home. Where we belong, where we can be at ease – it is right where we are."

So please be part of the Stewardship effort to keep Beacon's open door open. It may not be Jan's gargantuan version, but it, too is there for people to walk through when they wish to explore some of life's biggest challenges and possibilities."

Come, come, whoever you are...enter rejoice and come in and feel you have arrived. In the ballad from Pippin that we heard earlier as our musical interlude, you may have heard your own voice singing this verse "Rivers belong where they can ramble. Eagles belong where they can fly. [We've] got to be where our spirits can run free." Welcome home through our open door to your "corner of the sky." Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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