

**Finding Our Way**  
Rev. Victoria Ingram  
First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto  
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In May, I unexpectedly spent a week in hospital. As I got better, I go

Legends, myth and nursery tales make the danger known. The writings of most religious traditions assure us that a remedy can be found.

It happens to people, to cities, to riches, to wisdom, and to sheep. Children are particularly susceptible. Hansel and Gretel, the Kingdom, the truth, Odysseus (the traveller of Greek myth) and more... It seems that over the years of human history the fear of being lost or of losing that which we value has dominated a fair amount of our imagination.

And so too, the stories of travel. Of paths, chosen and not chosen. Poetry and prose, movies and myth – both ancient and modern, are full of them. Robert Frost, Goldilocks, Eat Pray Love, the Ancient Mariner... I could go on; the list is long. Humans, it seems, understand themselves and the arc of their lives, as journeys.

So many stories, stories of traveling, stories of being lost and stories of being found. At a deep level I think we can all identify with the notion that we, set out on a journey, are in danger of losing our way. To the stories of myth and legend, we can add our own. Sometimes the stories seem literal, and at other times they are most certainly allegoric.

As a child I loved stories and books (I suppose I still do), and on reflection I realize that those I often loved were those where the protagonist had journeys to take. I found the sense of adventure, the anticipation, the uncertainty and the suspense very engaging. I also, in my play imagined myself part of similarly epic travels. My parent's home was on a ravine, and my friends and I would pack lunches, and set out on what, we were sure, would be daylong adventures, fraught with danger and daring. We believed ourselves characters in a legendary tales, leaping across streams, saving the frogs, slogging through the marsh and only through the force of our superior wits and strong characters able to find our way safely home at the end of the day. In the years since those of earlier courage and daring, I have been on other trips – and on reflection they have provided opportunities for learning about myself and for rich reflection. When I was 15 I travelled to Rimouski Quebec, where I knew no one, for a French Language exchange. Gary, my spouse, and I travelled, predictably, with backpacks to Europe, in our 20s. Less predictably, we did a similar trip years later, with two teen aged daughters. Some years ago now, as my 50th birthday approached, I decided I wanted to do something I'd never really done, spend an extended period alone, so I packed my bag, put our canoe on the car and headed out for 4 days on a small lake near Algonquin Park. But there have been other trips too, less about physical journeys and more about relationships and personal reflection. As a child, navigating family life when my mother's health was in significant jeopardy, the joy and challenge of becoming a parent, finding myself

dealing with my aging parents, learning and relearning the dance of marriage. Hearing news so profoundly hard that I felt as if I couldn't breathe. I could go on... because life is full. Some of the journeys I've taken have been quite easy, but on others I've felt completely alone, frightened and lost. I think you know what I'm talking about.

I invite you to sit for a moment and think about some of the journeys that you've been on. Think about the easy ones and the others - those where it's been hard to imagine where you would put your foot, how you would take your next step and where you've felt so, so very lost and alone.

And though you and I have been on those hard roads, and while some of us may still be on them, we are still here, still looking down the road, checking our compass, altering our route and working to find our way.

So how can we make our way through the world and our lives? How do we deal with those times when we, as we all must, find ourselves unsure, or lost. What light will we find that helps illuminate the roads we find ourselves on? I hate to disappoint but I can't really act as a guide for your particular journey. All I can offer, all anyone else can offer is more like signpost than Sherpa. But signposts are useful, and we ignore them at our peril.

I asked a few questions in the place where all mysteries can be understood and where all people are wise. I asked two questions, "What helps you to find your way when you are feeling lost?" and "What is it about Unitarian Universalism that sustains and guides you?" And like the oracle Facebook responded.

One response I received, reminded me of the story, of two men.

A man was walking down the street on a dark evening, and came across another, searching under the street light, scrambling on his hands and knees.

"Can I help you?" the first man asked, "What are you looking for?"

The man on the ground responded, "They key to my house."

The first man dropped to the ground and began helping. A few minutes later, after searching on the ground alongside the other, he asked, "Where did you lose your keys?"

The man who had lost the keys waved his arm in the darkness. "Over there, outside my house." The first man jumped up, "What!! Why are you looking here?"

"Well", the second man replied, "there is more light here, under the street light, than there is in front of my house."

It is true, the success of our looking depends in no small measure on where we do it. People told me that when they are lost they have learned to start the search for answers where they are, and that they have come to trust the small, seemingly insignificant clues. They find paring back to the essential questions, is important. Maybe we don't need to ask, in those moments when we are wondering "What next", "What is the meaning of life", but can instead learn to ask, "What will help me deal with this situation, here and now?" or "What helps me make sense of this situation". Remembering that we

don't need to answer all the questions now, but that we can consider them as needed, is a useful lesson.

Another person shared how they found great comfort in knowing that, as a Unitarian Universalist, they didn't need to find answers that will last them forever. Knowing that today's answers might be drastically different than tomorrow's takes off some of the pressure. What would it mean to you if in navigating your journey you reminded yourself that regrouping and re-provisioning was not only possible, but necessary? What you pack today does not need to last you for the whole trip. A good friend of mine, says about packing for a trip, "I've learned not to worry about forgetting something. I've learned that if I need something I don't have, that they have stores where I am going."

Others shared how their regular spiritual practice became useful during the hard times. Prayer, meditation, regular walks in nature – all of these, when done with regularity have the capacity, during the times when things are hardest, when the path is so very dark, to help us find our way. When something is done regularly, it is possible to do it, with relative ease, during times of stress, or when we are distracted. And revisiting a regular practice has the effect of calling us back to ourselves, of stopping the panicky and anxious responses our primitive brains find themselves racing towards.

Another response, questioned the very idea of being lost, and suggested that it is possible to remind ourselves, "wherever you go, there you are." Perhaps, came the suggestion, that at least some of the time, our fear of being lost is a fear of loss of control, or perhaps realistically, a fear of the loss of the illusion of control. This person shared a story and a poem.

There is a teaching story out of the Northwest Native American tradition that would be told by an elder to a young girl or boy who asked the question, "What do I do when I am lost in the forest?" In a poem, he wrote, based on the traditional story, poet David Wagoner, offers a response:

*Stand still. The trees ahead  
and bushes beside you  
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here.  
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger.  
Must ask permission to know it and be known.  
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers.  
I have made this place around you.  
If you leave it you may come back again.  
saying Here.  
No two trees are the same to Raven.  
No two branches are the same to Wren.  
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you.  
You art surely lost. Stand still.  
The forest knows  
Where you are. You must let it find you.*

Indeed, often when I've felt lost, my own sense of who and where I was, my own sense of control was what was truly missing. During the times, when my longing for control has led me to ask, "Why me?", I've found comfort in remembering I could just as easily have asked, "Why not me?" I'm not in charge of the world, there is much about my life and those of those I love I cannot control. And contrary to my natural inclination to fight that reality, there is, ultimately comfort in it. I can't escape the unfamiliar, those events that make me feel lost, and letting go of the expectation that I might, has been very helpful. The forest knows where I am, I must let it find me. When we can relax into the mystery, into the unknown, we can actually learn a great deal. My sometimes frantic grip on my life, is actually a death hold on joy. It gets in the way of me being present, and relaxing into reality. Henry David Thoreau wrote, "not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves." I might say, until we let ourselves be lost, we can't truly find ourselves.

Nor should we forget the amazing gift that getting lost sometimes offers us. At least a few times during my travels I've found myself, I've found myself, well, at first I didn't know where. After the initial anxiety, again of feeling out of control, I've been able to assure myself that being lost doesn't necessarily equate with danger and it is then that I can look up, and around and appreciate the place where I've found myself. I've got a few friends that those unanticipated destinations have offered up, and I've got a few wonderful memories.

The journey through life and the roads we travel are sometimes not the ones we plan. Sometimes we get so disoriented, so turned around that it is easy to forget who we are and where we are. And there are times, absolutely there are times when the prudent course of action is to regroup and to find ourselves safely back to known territory. Being lost isn't always a grand adventure. I've got life experience that confirms the fear; sometimes losing our way can, truly, be life and death business. Sometimes the consequences can cause real pain and real suffering. Sometimes when we are lost we cause serious and irreparable damage to ourselves and to our relationships. Knowing who we are and knowing where we came from are often a safeguard against the genuine difficulties that being lost can bring. The list of possible perils is long, and includes illness, addiction, loss of relationship and sometimes loss of life. We are wise to not be too cavalier about dark and unknown roads. And when we travel them, as we inevitably must, it is always wise to bring along a flashlight. And a friend, or more than one. Travelling together is usually safer, more satisfying and more fun.

Here, in the congregation, you are finding your way together. Your mission statement, shared weekly is a reminder of that. The mission of this congregation is to nurture connection, share life's joys and sorrows, and act for love and justice. That is work that is best managed with good companions. What exactly that looks like for you collectively, or for each of you as an individual is not something I can prescribe for you. The answer to the questions comes from within, within the individual and the collective. I'm glad you have one another as you do this work. I'm glad that Rev. Alex will companion you on the journey!

It is written, in the Buddhist Sutta, that as he was about to die, the Buddha said to Ananda, a monk and his attendant, “Be ye lamps unto yourselves, be a refuge to yourselves.” Salvation, enlightenment, and roadmaps it seems are personal business. The Buddha also said that carrying truth as a lamp was necessary to follow the path to the topmost height. It seems that even if I thought I had an answer, it wouldn’t do any of you any good. It might be the light I need to guide my way, but it can’t be yours.

I said earlier that my remarks today were more signpost than Sherpa. And after next week, our journeys will take us in different directions.  
But you have companions.

Perhaps during those times when your own light is failing, someone here will be able to lift theirs a little higher, helping you see your next step.

It has been my delight to travel alongside you for a while—to keep you company, to offer encouragement, and to share some of the joys and sorrows of the road.

And now, as our paths begin to diverge, I trust you to find your way.

May you continue to be signposts for one another.

May you carry light for one another.

And may you always remember that you do not have to travel alone.

Let us take a few deep breaths in silent reflection