

## **“The Quest and The Garden”**

*A sermon delivered by Reverend Meg Soens on April 28, 2013*

It's been quite a journey to reach this day, hasn't it?  
You and I have both been on a quest these past two years,  
a quest to find the right combination of minister and congregation.

I love quests and journeys – how could I not – I love to travel! Whether it's going to China as a young academic, spending two weeks in Zambia with my younger teenagers helping out in a preschool, or walking beside old industrial canals in Lowell for an afternoon with my son. ... I love it.

And as much as I love the adventure of travel, I have also been, like some of you, a spiritual traveler, a seeker, for much of my life. So, although I began an Episcopalian and found comfort in Buddhism, it's not surprising that I would end up a Unitarian Universalist. You see, if we have a shared theology today, I'm willing to bet that it is what we might call “the theology of the quest” or “the theology of the journey.”

Google, and you'll see what I mean! Look at our new hymnbook, at the associations' religious education curriculae... And listen to this way of describing us:

“Unitarian Universalist congregations are a support group for people on individual journeys toward ultimate ends, such as truth, harmony, love....”

This theology of the journey is a connective thread in much of our contemporary worship and conversation ... However, I am going to be as heretical as one can be in a faith tradition that has no creed... This journey theology is not enough. In fact, the current dominance of the metaphor over all others can foster real spiritual limitations as well.

It matters what we think.

Metaphors like “quest” or “journey” not only *reflect* our thinking and experience, they also *organize* our thinking and experience. They can spark new analogical possibilities, and at the same time, their very structure and content creates blind spots as well.

Now, it is no wonder that “the journey” is so prominent in our spiritual conversation. For one thing, the story of the hero's quest is *the* paramount Western myth, according to the famous scholar Joseph Campbell. Think Ulysses, Beowulf, King Arthur, Dorothy, Frodo.....

There is no question that this quest or journey metaphor is powerful; it has helped many of us reflect deeply on our lives and given us hope.

I used to co-lead a support group for survivors of domestic violence. We gathered every Wednesday morning, and always began with a reading. One reading that had the power to move every survivor in the group to tears. It told their story, and helped them imagine what they could do. Some of you may be familiar with it, “The Journey” by Mary Oliver...

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice--

...

and you felt the old tug at your ankles.  
“Mend my life!”  
each voice cried.  
But you didn’t stop.

...

It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.  
But little by little  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice,

which you slowly recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do--  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.

Seeing life as a journey can be especially powerful when what we need is escape and freedom from some kind of bondage, like the survivors of domestic violence with whom I worked. This helps to explain why “the journey” paradigm figures so prominently in our spiritual imagination.

Our Unitarian tradition differentiated itself from the more conservative Christianity of the early 1800s in part through its focus on individual freedom and conscience. Today, we still cherish individual freedom as a core value in our Unitarian Universalist identity, and it anchors our theology of the journey.

But we need more than that.

Rev. Wayne Muller, in his book entitled Sabbath, tells the story of a woman who had been on a quest for meaning her whole life. He met her at a retreat. She was a spiritual seeker who “had traveled to sacred sites, attended retreats and workshops, [and] sought teachers and guides. It had, she confessed [to him], been a time of much striving; it had been fruitful, yet she felt tired.

“You have been a seeker for so long,” Rev. Muller told her...

“Why not become a finder?”

Why not become a finder?

.....

Perhaps we don't often become “finders” in Unitarian Universalism because we usually see ourselves as on a personal journey. We are always heading toward somewhere else, some other idea, some other place, some other time.... Perhaps “finding” is impossible when we seem committed to the perpetual journey.

A bigger obstacle may be that our journey has but one hero – our self. It's a story about one individual, and creates blind spots when it comes to the committed relationships and ongoing context that actually define our personal identities and give us meaning.

Other factors may hold some of us Unitarian Universalists back from “finding” not just what we deeply believe in, but more importantly, the answer to the question of **how** we will live out our values. Surely one factor is our sense that all spiritual knowledge is tentative and partial. This can leave us feeling resigned, or content to move about the banquet hall, sampling different dishes on every table, but never taking a seat at any one.

Let me share the story of how I finally found myself jarred into something other than my journey viewpoint – always seeking, never really finding.

Several years ago, my older sister Chris died a hard death. It came not long after my mother and father had also died. One month after my sister's death, overwhelmed, I literally came to a stop.

As I looked around from my stopping place, I realized that in all my journeying, I hadn't actually traveled nearly as far as I had thought.

- For one thing, I still had only a weak faith in the world, and no real faith in the holy;
- In addition, I was just learning what it meant to commit myself deeply enough to a faith community to learn its slow lessons about how to love better;
- And finally, I still lived in personal relationships distorted by my anxiety...

I was lost. And where I was lost looked like a desert. I needed to become a finder then, a finder of some meaning and gifts in the desert of griefs I could not flee. Or a gardener, perhaps, who could find life in that desert, and nourish it.

My experience suggests that when we need healing, when we need wholeness, we need a theology and a faith perspective that values not escape, freedom and the journey, but rather values and engages the place where we stand.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist, put it well. In his book on general Buddhist doctrines, he reminds us that when animals are hurt they do four things: they stop, they lie down, they rest and they heal.

For humans, stopping, stepping away from life as a quest or journey allows us to assess what is in and around us NOW, not what was around us yesterday, or where we might be tomorrow. Most importantly, it allows us to cultivate what heals us. What heals us is our relationships: our relationships with our self, with other people, and with the holy. For we humans are only fully human, can only be whole, in relationship.

Faith communities exist to honor and uphold the centrality of certain committed relationships in our lives. Congregations support us as individuals, in part, by holding us accountable to that “something” beyond our little selves, whether we call that “something” our shared values, God, the mystery of Life, or human ethics.

If we let ways of looking at faith and life that focus on the individual and freedom dominate our imagination rather than the centrality of committed relationships, then a faith community risks diminishing into a group of individuals who simply care for each other but without a sense of higher purpose, or even who just share a physical space for an hour on Sunday as they cultivate some particular quality of mind.

I hope you see why it is important for us to imagine our lives in ways that both acknowledge our particular connections and our relational nature, and yet contain transformative creative possibilities for healing and wholeness and growth. So, I invite you to try imagining yourself – at least some of the time – not as a journeyer, or a seeker, but as a gardener.

Now, for a number of you, reflecting and imagining using a garden metaphor will be quite a stretch. Maybe you grew up in a city apartment with no plants, or perhaps everything green that comes within ten feet of you mysteriously dies...

For you garden-challenged people, please, do some good UU mental translation, and when I say “garden”, imagine a bit more broadly, imagine any place in nature, big or small, that appeals to you: a beautiful park in the city, an open hilltop where you played during childhood vacations, a neighbor’s window box of flowers...

Let’s play a little with this idea of ourselves as gardeners ... and see how it might work as a lens that helps us to focus on nurturing and relationships and growth:

For example, ...

When I see myself as a gardener,  
if I get the flu, and can’t get off the couch, I can accept the *limitations* of the day.  
I can accept that the kids have to get themselves dinner tonight, even if it is messy or just potato chips. For the gardener can weed and plant and water, but can only work with when Nature allows, and on some days, that will mean staying indoors.

Standing in the garden, we also know that we will see *seasons* of abundance as well as seasons of want, seasons of warmth and seasons of cold. When we go through a hard period with our partner or spouse, we know we are in a season of want, but as a gardener, we remember too that seasons of abundance will wheel around again in our lives.

As gardeners, we also remember that we need to *plan* now for sprouting, blooming, and harvest later, and we need to do the work if we are to reap its fruits.

Gardeners know, too, of the importance of *patience*, patience to wait on the seasons, and to let the plots lay fallow for a period, so the nutrients will not be depleted, and the fields can produce again.

If for example, I have recently lost my job, this knowledge is important. I need to plan for the future and do the preparatory spadework, yet I also need to find the patience to accept that the sprouting and blooming of opportunities will happen on a larger cycle of time, one not completely dependent upon my own efforts. And perhaps, I can even find a way to understand this period as one that replenishes or plants new seeds in me, or in someone I love.

Finally, the most important aspect of the garden is that the plants, insects and birds there are interdependent and specialized. The gardener knows the importance of *community*, and how dependent we all are upon our relationships. The gardener understands how creatures play different but essential roles.

So as a gardener, I can know that even if my physical capacities now are greatly diminished from times past, my role in the community is still vital, even if it has changed from laborer to keeper of memory and wisdom.

“You have been a seeker for so long,” Rev. Muller said. ...

”Why not become a finder?”

If the question resonates in your heart, stop, rest, and look at the patch of land that is your life. Look for the buds of what you want to grow stronger, notice where the bramble bushes are, what might be cleared, and what will not. Then look at the larger garden that is your faith community. Ask, what life there needs nurturing, what needs a bit of pruning?

My friends, we explore the meaning of our lives together in this faith community, becoming whole and healed, regenerating and transforming in new and surprising ways, again and again... Adventure, freedom and escape may come to us on our journeys, and love, healing and nurture are ours in the garden.

May **this** faith garden support the flowering of deep respect, the blooming of care, the ripening of commitment to the faith community and our values, and the harvest of personal humility. May **this** faith community, this garden, help us learn to love better, and to better bless others and the world with caring attention.

Amen. Blessed Be.