

LIFE IS A JOURNEY!
THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH
THE REV. JULIE STONEBERG
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OPENING WORDS *At Home*¹ ~ Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes

“Why were you searching for me?

Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” - Luke 2.49

On this windblown street
here I,
finding my way,
stand, thinking of being lost
while in truth I am home,
in your house,
far from where I came from
and still
because all flesh is Word made flesh
at home in you.
And here in this temple you
not with answers but with questions
call me home
to not a place
but a presence,
heartwise,
close to you in this
beatific, banal or horrific
place I am,
the distance between us
vanished.

Come then now, to this place, this home, that the distance between us may vanish.

READING *The Journey*² ~ Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"

each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,

¹ www.unfoldinglight.net

² Oliver, Mary, *Dream Work*

and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voice 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 that you could save.

MESSAGE *Life is a Journey!* ~ Rev. Julie

Do you know where you are going? Or even what you're doing in order to BE going? If you are anything like me, questions like these can be haunting: Who am I? Do I have a purpose in life? What is that purpose? Am I pointed in the right direction? When will I get there? How will I know if I am there?

Just yesterday, while still in the throes of waking up, I got sucked into a quiz posted in my Facebook feed. The leading question: "Wondering what to do with your life?" It claimed that taking a quiz would give me my 'sparketype'³ which, once I knew what it was, would then help me to live a "more meaningful, connected and vital life."

Even as I took the quiz...about 50-60 questions I think...I wondered why I was taking it. I mean, don't I already know what I'm doing with my life, and isn't it already meaningful, connected, and vital?

But still...the carrot was there. Maybe I would learn something that would be a breakthrough into a new possibility. Maybe I would be transformed. Maybe this is the one key that would unlock an understanding that has been hidden from me thus far. Maybe...

Well, if the quiz is at all accurate, the resulting 'sparketype' was no big surprise. As I already knew, had I paid attention to my inner knowing rather than my monkey-mind ego, I am doing with my life what I want to do with my life. And another thing that I already know, is that taking a quiz...this kind of detour into self-doubt is simply part of the journey. And that, in itself, is an opportunity for growing and learning as I travel on my spiritual journey.

Spiritual journey, you ask?? What the heck is that?

For now, let's just say that spirituality is that dimension of existence in which we become aware of the 'more'. More than our surface identities, and so it involves a willingness to dive deeply within to find our own truths... more than just what affects 'me', because spirituality is about connecting and interconnecting with that which is 'outside' of our individual selves... and more than only what is easily apparent, in that spirituality is about opening to greater, more diverse, and even unknowable truths and experiences. So, if spirituality is about the 'more', then the spiritual journey is the path that leads us to search for the 'more'...more opening, more deeply.

³ <https://www.goodlifeproject.com/podcast/sparketypes/>

Perhaps the most curious thing about the spiritual journey, is that it leads one right back to where you are. Its goal is to be, just as you are, just where you are. You, here, now. You...authentic and true. Here...present and grounded. Now...in this moment.

Using a different spiritual language, some describe this journey as getting closer to God. By my lights, getting closer to God and getting closer to your true self, are essentially the same thing. The Quakers speak of the divine within...that still small voice inside of us...and to be in that place, is to be one with God. Which is to say, that we are closest to God, or Christ-energy, when we are our truest selves...you, here. Now. Us, here, together, in this moment.

I chose today's opening words with this in mind. Remember? Those words began with a verse from the Christian testament...which comes from a time early in Jesus' life, when he went with Mary and Joseph to Jerusalem for a festival. The story tells us that when it came time to leave, they couldn't find Jesus. After frantically searching for three days, they found him in the temple. And the young Jesus says to his parents, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"

It should have made complete sense to his parents, thinks Jesus. He is right there, right where he is fully who he is. How could they not have known?

Well, yes. How could we not know where it is that we are meant to be? It's just not that obvious most of the time, right? That poet, Steve Garnaas-Holmes, goes on from that verse to tell about finding his way, thinking he was lost, while all the time being home, where the distance between where he was and who he was vanished. Here. Now.

Just as each spiritual journey is unique to the unique being on its path, you will find that some guides and teachers (including me) will be helpful to you, and some will not. Some poems, some words, are helpful, and some are not. Like the little child in today's story,⁴ we will all encounter distractions...floating leaves, purring cats, swamps with reticent frogs, brilliant birds and fleeting rabbits. And Facebook feeds. Because of, and despite of, these encounters, we still feel compelled to find and follow a particular star. Our star. Our path.

Still, there are lots of ways to consider, to define, to measure, the spiritual journey. For example, James Fowler famously developed a theory about the stages of faith, which sees the spiritual journey through a developmental lens. Peter Tufts Richardson presented the spiritual journey as a menu of different expressions, suggesting that all journeys fall into one of four categories...a search for unity, or devotion, or service, or harmony. Deepak Chopra likens the spiritual journey to a progression from being a victim of the five senses to ultimately becoming a co-creator with nature. A Buddhist might say the spiritual journey is about releasing ego, and becoming non-attached to outcomes. And there are apparently, also, sparketypes.

Last summer I read, and then re-read, and re-read again, *Falling Upward*⁵, Richard Rohr's book about the spiritual journey. He contends that the spiritual life has two stages. In the first stage, we are devoted to establishing ourselves; we focus on making a career and on finding friends and partners; we craft our identities. During that part of the spiritual journey, we are

⁴ Reynolds, Peter, *The North Star*

⁵Rohr, Richard, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (Jossey-Bass; 2011)

often drawn to order, to routine, to predictables. Rohr speaks about this stage as creating a container for our lives.

The second stage, he says, doesn't necessarily follow, because we can choose not to go any deeper. We can choose not to answer whatever call comes.

But often some crisis, "some kind of falling," forces us, or calls us, into greater spiritual development. We might lose something...a job, a fortune, a reputation, a relationship... or we encounter some kind of suffering...a death, a flood, a disease, a fire, a war. The crisis is devastating. It undoes us. It washes out what spiritual life we thought we had, and the life we are living comes to be no longer acceptable.⁶

If we welcome this crisis as something that we can learn from, the second stage opens to us. In a blog called "The Velveteen Rabbi," Rabbi Rachel Barenblat⁷ likens falling into this crisis to an aphorism from the Hasidic masters...yeridah l'tzorech aliyah (pardon my Hebrew) which means descent for the sake of ascent. Falling upward.

Descent for the sake of ascent. The dark night of the soul. Rohr says that the voice beckoning us forward..."will sound an awful lot like the voices of risk, of trust, of surrender, of soul, of 'common sense,' of destiny, of love, of an intimate stranger, of your deepest self." And, we can hear this familiar voice, whatever its sound, because of all the work we did in the first stage; we have, we are, a container strong enough to hold the call, and the perils, of this deeper journey.

Now, Rohr speaks of these two stages as the first and second halves of life, and although he is quick to remind us that the stages do not map to chronological age, I do think he places too strong an emphasis on the stages being sequential. Rather, I believe we move between these two stages all the time. We cycle in and out and back in again. We build our container, and then we hit a bump, and the container cracks, and we spend some time repairing the container, and then we are busted open again by something, and again we re-build. I expect that the more comfortable we become in the second stage, the more flexible and creatively-unique our container becomes...there are fewer rules, less rigidity, more spaciousness. And the more deeply we can spiral into the journey.

I also believe that there are experiences other than crisis that move us into the second stage; it might be some kind of awakening, or a call to adventure. Sometimes we may go on that journey in order to gain something...wisdom, enlightenment, peace. Whatever the call, however, the second stage, the deeper journey, will always bring us to our knees, stripping away everything, until we see that it's not about 'having' or 'gaining' at all...it's about BEING.

The point is, wherever you are, your journey is your journey. Your journey to become who you are. Your journey to know what your life is about. Only you can determine the path, and choose your steps. No one else can tell you who you are. No one else can determine, for you, the meaning of your life.

⁶ <https://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2011-08/falling-upward-richard-rohr>

⁷ <https://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2017/07/falling-upward.html>

But remember that that truth...that your journey is your journey...coexists with at least two other truths. One is that none of us is alone, and the other is that there is more out there than just you. Your journey is influenced by, and in turn influences, the journey of all who you come into contact with. Your journey is accountable to others, and to life itself.

And it is here that my personal theology-of-choice, process theology, comes into play. Process theology sees all of life as a process...or a journey...so that in every moment we are becoming. Life unfolds, and who we are unfolds along with it. In each moment we make choices from all that is available to us. We are influenced by our past, by the presence of others around us, and by the lure of the good, the beautiful. We can choose which of those influences we will take in, and then what steps to take and in what direction to take those steps. And what we choose is available as an influence for others.

At times, at all places on the journey, a lot of our energy is directed toward knowing our true selves, and that involves choosing which parts of our past to carry, and which to leave behind. There is a lot of discernment work in this...to determine what bits are true to us, and which are not. We might be required to untangle ourselves from ways of being that are restricting us...which is tough work.

A couple of weeks ago, Nicole McKay spoke to you about Marie Kondo's work and about connecting with that 'spark of joy' that will help us to determine what physical things we choose to have in our space. Well, a similar discernment is required on the spiritual journey...to find those 'sparks' of identity and truth which ignite, informing us of what path is truly ours. Sparks that whisper in our ears, give us heart pangs, or tingling in our spines. We will know those sparks, by the very fact of their spark-iness.

Interesting, isn't it, that the Facebook quiz I took suggested it could tell me my 'sparketype'... that personality trait or focus that gives me the most spark, or the most joy. Looking deeper into the company behind this quiz, I found the Good Life Project,⁸ which promotes building community, and offers face-to-face camps to have courageous conversations that build deep, and open-hearted connections. And I thought, well, isn't that what we already have here?

Indeed we are not alone. We come together to be nourished, to re-build and repair our containers, to pick up tips for the journey...just generally to hang out with folks who are willing to look deeply at life and its meaning. We come here that we may continue on our spiritual journeys. We come together to provide support for others, even as they support us. Our presence here, gathered together, makes it possible for each of us to do the work of discernment necessary to live well-examined lives of meaning and joy.

You. Here. Now. We. Together. In this moment. At this precious rest stop...where we may be refreshed, gain sustenance, and share the journey ahead.

May it be so.

⁸ <https://www.goodlifeproject.com/>
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READING

*The Journey*⁹

~ David Whyte

Above the mountains
the geese turn into
the light again

Painting their
black silhouettes
on an open sky.

Sometimes everything
has to be
inscribed across
the heavens

so you can find
the one line
already written
inside you.

Sometimes it takes
a great sky
to find that

first, bright
and indescribable
wedge of freedom
in your own heart.

Sometimes with
the bones of the black
sticks left when the fire
has gone out

someone has written
something new
in the ashes of your life.

You are not leaving.
Even as the light fades quickly now,
you are arriving.

*** CLOSING WORDS** *Blessed is the Path* ~ Eric Williams¹⁰

Blessed is the path on which you travel.
Blessed is the body that carries you upon it.
Blessed is your heart that has heard the call.
Blessed is your mind that discerns the way.
Blessed is the gift that you will receive by going.
Truly blessed is the gift that you will become on the journey.
May you go forth in peace.

Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME

⁹ Whyte, David, *House of Belonging*

¹⁰ <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/benediction/blessed-path>