

# Course Adjustments

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## **Meditation** “Remember the Moose” by Catherine Lake

Threenarrows is a gangly lake made up of a series of long lakes connected by a northern body of water like fingers to a hand. Multiple river inlets and marshy offshoots make for vigilant navigation. With a topographical map and a reassuring compass you can't get completely lost but it is easy to get diverted from your carefully planned route.

We did not know we were off course when we watched the young black bear scramble lithely across the rock outcrop and into forest. But we did realize it when we paddled into a marsh to find a large moose pulling its heavy shoots of supper from the boggy water's edge. Huge and wary of its unwelcomed guests, we suspended our journey to witness its magnificence before backtracking to our proper route.

Sometimes we misread the map, unwittingly change our course and encounter beauty. For the small price of pride, time, and additional muscle ache, we were offered this gift.

Two days later, a broken elbow brought us American strangers—in fact, self-identified rednecks—who carried our gear over the steepest portage in the park. Two kilometres of rough mountain terrain and a chatty southern accent echoed that adage about the kindness of strangers and allowed us to manage the rest of our route on our own.

When we adjust our course or when our path is suddenly adjusted for us, we are often called to rely on the generosity of strangers and of those closest to us.

A fracture demands extra hands for dressing.

A new job requires other's support.

A baby supersedes our social time with friends.

Let us be mindful of the demands a new direction may take; planned and unplanned; let us be generous with ourselves and with others when change upsets the presumed routine.

Remember kindness and  
Remember the moose.

**Reading “The Layers” by Stanley Kunitz**

I have walked through many lives,  
some of them my own,  
and I am not who I was,  
though some principle of being  
abides, from which I struggle  
not to stray.

When I look behind,  
as I am compelled to look  
before I can gather strength  
to proceed on my journey,  
I see the milestones dwindling  
toward the horizon  
and the slow fires trailing  
from the abandoned camp-sites,  
over which scavenger angels  
wheel on heavy wings.

Oh, I have made myself a tribe  
out of my true affections,  
and my tribe is scattered!

How shall the heart be reconciled  
to its feast of losses?

In a rising wind  
the manic dust of my friends,  
those who fell along the way,  
bitterly stings my face.

Yet I turn, I turn,  
exulting somewhat,  
with my will intact to go  
wherever I need to go,  
and every stone on the road  
precious to me.

In my darkest night,  
when the moon was covered

and I roamed through wreckage,  
a nimbus-clouded voice  
directed me:

“Live in the layers,  
not on the litter.”  
Though I lack the art  
to decipher it,  
no doubt the next chapter  
in my book of transformations  
is already written.  
I am not done with my changes.

### **Sermon: “Course Adjustments”**

One night a rabbi in Moscow feeling despondent—  
overwhelmed by the state of the world—  
went for his evening walk, lost in thought,  
forgetting where he was and who he was,  
as he inadvertently wandered into a restricted zone.

The guard on duty saw him and called out,  
“Who are you? And where are you going?”

“Pardon me?” the rabbi said.

“I said, ‘who are you, and where are you going?’”

The rabbi was shocked back to awareness by those two questions.

As he snapped out of his despair, he said to the guard,  
“How much money do you make?”

The guard replied, “What business is that of yours?”

And the rabbi said, “I will pay you twice that sum  
if every day from now on you will ask me those same two questions.”

*“Who are you? And where are you going?”*

A second story—or actually, two stories from this past week.

The first about a young man named Al Harding from Edmonton.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier this month, standing at the cash of the Primrose Reddi Mart, with an extra \$5 in his pocket, Al made an impulse decision to buy a quick-pick ticket.

Last Sunday morning, when he finally got around to checking the numbers, he realized that he had an exact match.

In fact, when he called in to verify the numbers, he learned that he held the sole winning ticket—worth just under \$7-million.

Al says he has big plans for his windfall. He’s booking trips to Japan and Germany, buying a new sports car, and building a garage where he can restore vintage vehicles.

He also plans to buy a new home in Edmonton.

He said, “I could never imagine moving away. I want to stay in the community that I love.

And then he added: “I don’t have a care in the world anymore.”

When I heard that, I thought, “really, not a care in the world?”

And, I wondered how this sudden change of fortune will change him.

I thought that Al Harding’s story was an interesting contrast to Gerald Clement from Ottawa, who also won the lottery last week.<sup>2</sup>

Gerald has been playing the numbers for a long time, always hoping for a big win.

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<sup>1</sup> “\$5 quick pick leads to \$6.7M Lotto 6/49 jackpot,” *Edmonton Journal*, August 23, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Doug Hempsted and Aeden Helmer, “Lotto winner gets luck on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>,” *Toronto Sun*, August 24, 210.

And then it happened—on August 13<sup>th</sup>, a Friday, no less, he won the \$25-million Lotto Max prize.

What was fascinating, though, is that he waited a full week to claim his winnings—and he spent that week preparing himself for this life-changing moment.

He said that he recognized he was “so lucky to have a close-knit network of family and friends [he] could turn to in this situation” and so he took a long time trying to understand what this win will likely mean for his life.

The questions “Who are you? And what are you doing here?” can come in so many different shapes and sizes.

A final story. This one longer, and told by the brilliant writer Kent Nerburn.<sup>3</sup>

Twenty years ago, I drove a cab for a living.  
It was a cowboy’s life, a life for someone who wanted no boss.

Because I drove the night shift,  
my cab became a moving confessional.

Passengers climbed in, sat behind me in total anonymity,  
and told me about their lives.

I encountered people whose lives amazed me,  
ennobled me, made me laugh and weep.

But none touched me more  
than a woman I picked up late one August night.

I was responding to a call from a small brick fourplex  
in a quiet part of town.

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<sup>3</sup> Kent Nerburn, “One Last Ride,” *Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace: Living in the Spirit of the Prayer of St. Francis*.

I assumed I was being sent to pick up some partiers,  
or someone who had just had a fight with a lover,  
or a worker heading to an early shift at some factory  
in the industrial part of town.

When I arrived at 2:30 a.m., the building was dark  
except for a single light in a ground floor window.

Under such circumstances, many drivers would just honk once or twice,  
wait a minute, then drive away.

But I had seen too many impoverished people  
who depended on taxis as their only means of transportation.

Unless a situation smelled of danger, I always went to the door.  
This passenger might be someone who needs my assistance,  
I reasoned to myself. So I walked to the door and knocked.

“Just a minute”, answered a frail, elderly voice.  
I could hear something being dragged across the floor.

After a long pause, the door opened.  
A small woman in her 80s stood before me.  
She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat  
with a veil pinned on it, like somebody out of a 1940s movie.  
By her side was a small nylon suitcase.

The apartment looked as if no one had lived in it for years.  
All the furniture was covered with sheets.  
There were no clocks on the walls,  
no knickknacks or utensils on the counters.  
In the corner was a cardboard box filled with photos and glassware.

“Would you carry my bag out to the car?” she asked.  
I took the suitcase to the cab, then returned to assist the woman.

She took my arm and we walked slowly toward the curb.  
She kept thanking me for my kindness.

“It’s nothing”, I told her. “I just try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother treated”.

When we got in the cab, she gave me an address, then asked, “Can you drive through downtown?”

“It’s not the shortest way,” I answered quickly.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” she said.

“I’m in no hurry. I’m on my way to a hospice”.

I looked in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were glistening.

“I don’t have any family left,” she said.

[And] “The doctor says I don’t have very long.”

I quietly reached over and shut off the meter.

“What route would you like me to take?” I asked.

For the next two hours, we drove through the city.

She showed me the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator.

We drove through the neighbourhood where she and her husband had lived when they were newlyweds.

She had me pull up in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl.

Sometimes she’d ask me to slow in front of a particular building or corner and would sit staring into the darkness, saying nothing.

As the first hint of sun was creasing the horizon, she suddenly said, “I’m tired. Let’s go now.”

We drove in silence to the address she had given me.

It was a low building, like a small convalescent home,

with a driveway that passed under a portico.

Two orderlies came out to the cab as soon as we pulled up. They were solicitous and intent, watching her every move. They must have been expecting her.

I opened the trunk and took the small suitcase to the door. The woman was already seated in a wheelchair.

“How much do I owe you?” she asked, reaching into her purse.

“Nothing,” I said.

“You have to make a living,” she answered.

“There are other passengers,” I responded.

Almost without thinking, I bent [down] and gave her a hug. She held onto me tightly.

“You gave an old woman a little moment of joy,” she said.  
“Thank you.”

I squeezed her hand, then walked into the dim morning light. Behind me, a door shut. It was the sound of the closing of a life.

Nerburn goes on to say that he didn't pick up any more passengers that shift.

That he “drove aimlessly, lost in thought.

And that, “for the rest of that day, [he] could hardly talk.”

He wondered: “What if that woman had gotten an angry driver, or one who was impatient to end his shift? What if [he] had refused to take the run, or had honked once, then driven away?”

In retrospect, Nerburn says that he doesn't think he has ever done anything more important in his life than what he did that night.

And that's the way it so often happens, isn't it?

That life calls out to us in an unexpected voice,  
at unbidden moments,  
to ask us just who we are and where we think we're going.

Sometimes the voice is the doctor's,  
when she tells us we're having a baby,  
or that we don't have as much time as we had thought—or hoped.

Sometimes the voice belongs  
to the stranger we instantly know we will love for the rest of our lives,  
or the partner who after many years lovingly asks us who we have become.

Sometimes the voice is the boss who flatly tells us we're fired,  
or the friend who means it when she asks: "okay, so now what?"

Sometimes the voice is one we don't even recognize,  
and sometimes the voice is one we know most deeply as our own.

Some may call it conscience. Some may call it divine.

But, there's something about it that won't let us go.

Its questions call to us,  
an invitation that ushers us up to the threshold of decision.

A voice that asks in countless, changing ways:  
do you keep on the way you're going,  
or do you need to change course?

Are you becoming the person you want to be,  
or have you gotten a bit off-track?

Such questions are gifts when they come—  
that's why, of course, the rabbi so wanted to hire the guard  
to confront him daily with those questions.

But, the truth is, if we're paying attention,  
we're being asked these questions on a pretty regular basis.

And, that's what so moved me about that woman's last cab ride.

Nerburn's willingness to turn off the meter  
and detour with her into the beautiful, bittersweet stuff of life  
made that ride a turning point for not only for her, but for him, as well.

In the crossing of their paths, they both won the lottery that night.

And decades later, Nerburn still holds on to the gifts of that night—  
gifts that came from being his best self in a moment that mattered.

It might have been otherwise.  
He could have driven away.  
He could have taken the shortest route.  
He could have stayed rigidly on his on path.

But, he would have missed the sacred opportunity—  
by wandering in the night with his precious passenger—  
to live most fully in the service of life itself.

We can only imagine what thoughts raced through his head,  
what things weighed on his heart,  
as he drove alone through the city streets  
with morning unfolding all around him.

What is clear, though, is that it was a turning point—  
a point from which his life was never quite the same.

He doesn't say how he was changed, but offers up instead  
the enduring recognition that chauffeuring that woman to her hospice  
was the most important act of his life.

The path that any of us follows is sure to be filled with detours,  
long slogs when we're not sure if we're headed in the right direction,  
and moments when it dawns on us that we're utterly lost.

I think of the “voices” that we sometimes hear along the way as road signs—  
some confirming that we’re doing just fine,  
others telling us on occasion that it’s high time to turn around.

I’m not enough of a mystic to trust that the signs are somehow pre-arranged.

But, I do believe we can use the experiences of a life deliberately lived  
to examine whether we’re on the path that accords with our highest values.

Earlier, in Stanley Kunitz’s poem,  
did you catch what he had to say about this?

I have walked through many lives, [he says,  
some of them my own,  
and I am not who I was,  
though some principle of being  
abides, from which I struggle  
not to stray.<sup>4</sup>

“Some principle of being abides, from which I struggle not to stray.”

He goes on, at the end of the poem, to say:

In my darkest night,  
when the moon was covered  
and I roamed through wreckage,  
a nimbus-clouded voice  
directed me:

“Live in the layers,  
not on the litter.”

Though I lack the art  
to decipher it,  
no doubt the next chapter  
in my book of transformations  
is already written.

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<sup>4</sup> “The Layers” by Stanley Kunitz.

I am not done with my changes.

And neither, I pray, are we.

As our lives unfold before us,  
may we be always open to the adjustments, both little and large,  
that lead us ever-more into the heart of who we were born to be.

Amen.

### **Closing Words**

The words of W.E.B. Dubois

“The prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence;  
not for the one good deed, or single thought,  
but deed on deed, and thought on thought,  
until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living.”

May we live to make it so—this day and for all our days to come.

Amen