

# “Ask for Directions”

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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.

Holly ran away because she was afraid of the fireworks.

Jacob and his wife Bonnie were retired, and they'd taken a vacation to Daytona Beach, Florida, along with their beloved cat.

After Holly ran away in the middle of a nighttime crowd, they put up signs around the area to see if anyone had found their microchipped pet. No-one responded.

They had no choice but to return home, 200 miles away.

Imagine their surprise when, more than two months later, Holly made it home—skinny and disheveled, barely able to walk.

But she made it home, somehow.<sup>1</sup>

And Holly is hardly unique. There are hundreds of stories of lost animals who find their way home each year against improbable odds.

Perhaps the most famous is Bobbie the Wonder Collie, who in 1923 traveled more than four thousand miles through mountains, deserts and plains to get from Indiana to Oregon.<sup>2</sup>

Scientists believe that these animals may be able to track the earth's magnetic fields, or perhaps be guided by the angle of the sun.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/14/holly-lost-cat\\_n\\_2473952.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/14/holly-lost-cat_n_2473952.html)

<sup>2</sup> Brad Steiger and Sherry Hansen Steiger, *Four-Legged Miracles: Heartwarming Tales of Lost Dogs' Journeys Home* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 2013), 3-7.

But even then, it's hard to explain the animals who locate their owners in places they've never seen.

Such as Joker, a Californian cocker spaniel who found his owner stationed on a military base in the Pacific during World War II.<sup>3</sup>

In those amazing cases, it's been suggested that an intuitive connection between pet and owner is enough to guide them.

It's almost as if love is the guiding force.

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I don't know about you, but when I hear these stories, along with a certain degree of wonder and some skepticism, I feel a twinge of envy for the single-minded purpose of these animals.

I don't get the feeling that Holly or Bobbie or Joker agonized very much about their decisions.

They weren't lying awake at night making lists of "pros" and "cons"...though they may well have been traveling at night to reach their destinations.

Human beings, on the other hand, sometimes have difficulty setting a course of direction and staying on it.

We have so many road signs around us now.

These days, they seem to be multiplying at a dizzying rate of speed.

It used to be that our local community, our local geography, allowed us to define our priorities.

The needs of the local ecosystem and the people who lived there guided us toward our immediate purpose, whether it was feeding our family, solving conflicts within the community, or taking care of the land.

The personal directions etched by one time, one place, one relationship are vividly revealed in the Billy Collins poem I read earlier.

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<sup>3</sup> Steiger, 175-176.

With the development of mass communication, and especially over the last twenty years as the Internet has transformed human life, our perspective has widened.

Suddenly we have many more voices competing for our attention, as we try to live lives of meaning and purpose.

We have a much larger map to consult for personal guidance, as we ask the many ordinary questions that call for direction.

Questions such as: “Which job should I take?”

“What cause should I support?”

“How should I spend my time today?”

“To what, or to whom, should I turn my attention?”

These questions of personal direction require us to become better navigators and, I think, to ask for directions along the way.

In the case of Bobbie the Wonder Collie who traveled three thousand miles, it's clear that he received car rides from kind people on country roads...he was given food by families who were concerned about him.

Even Bobbie the Wonder Collie had to ask for directions.

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But ask directions of whom—or of what?

Again, when it comes to sources of potential guidance, we are not suffering for lack of choice.

And as much as I love Unitarian Universalism, and was drawn to it in part for this very reason, it does not provide a simple route.

In addition to our 7 Principles, which emphasize ethical living within diverse communities, Unitarian Universalism is rooted in six sources of wisdom or insight.

And if six sounds like a small and manageable number, don't be fooled. Within them we really do try to cover all possible bases when it comes to direction.

So here are the current UU Sources, which we hope will provide guidance for our membership.

“Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;

Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;

Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;

And finally,

Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.”

Along with our Principles, the Sources are updated periodically<sup>4</sup> so if more helpful wayfinding tools are found, they may well be added to our collective knapsack.

Forgive me for admitting that sometimes it feels pretty heavy.

Sometimes along with the weight of the world's problems, we may find ourselves buckling under the weight of the world's potential solutions...and burdened by our limited ability to know which ones work best.

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<sup>4</sup> The current wording of the Principles and Purposes of the UUA member congregations was adopted in 1985 and modified in 1995. *The Principles and Purposes (1985)*, UU World online <http://www.uuworld.org/spirit/articles/3644.shtml>

At our worst, we may find ourselves in conflict over which direction to take...which source of insight or combination of sources will lead us most surely home.

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Because of our diversity, we're bound to have different homing systems.

Indeed, Unitarians affirm human freedom and individuality.

The respect for our inherent differences, the encouragement of the free search for truth and meaning and the affirmation of the democratic process—all of these are upheld in the UU principles.

They remind us that standing at intersections arguing about how to interpret the traffic signals is not going to get us very far.

As well, and as Bobbie the Wonder Collie experienced, sometimes we're going to travel in groups and sometimes we're going to walk the path alone.

Sometimes "asking for directions" happens in conversation or shared worship...but at other times, it happens in silence, in meditation or prayer.

Navigating life successfully means we have to preserve space for this deep listening, even if—or perhaps especially if—the listening does not yield immediate answers.

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One of the most appealing things about some forms of religion, both now and in the past, is that they keep things simple.

When there is one text to follow, one central authority figure to listen to, it can be used as a compass of sorts.

I have a neighbour who is a very conservative Christian. We got into a conversation the other day and, in an effort to allow both of our points of view, I found myself saying something like, "these issues are very complex."

To which she answered, "No, no, everything is very simple!"

Her response underscored another key difference in the way we saw the world—one that was perhaps just as significant than our theological differences.

I admit that her insistence that there should be *one* way rubbed me the *wrong* way...

And as I noticed that, I saw that I need to grow in my ability to remain in respectful dialogue with her...

If I truly want to work toward a world of peace and justice.

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As we know, Unitarian Universalism is anything but “simple.” It does not depend on one central doctrine or authority.

Many of us might describe ourselves as “seekers.”

Although that freedom can be stimulating and exhilarating, at times we might find ourselves longing for a simple answer.

Becoming conscious of that longing—that feeling of disorientation and confusion when it arises—can help us develop empathy for people whose belief systems may seem simplistic.

We might understand how the clarity of some religious doctrines might be appealing, in confusing times like these.

Of course, the need for acceptance of difference comes up without venturing beyond our own doors.

In a provocative sermon entitled “Why You Should Not Be a Unitarian Universalist,” Rev. Dr. Tony Larsen urged us not to disrespect those beliefs that we may not hold ourselves, but which may assist others in living more ethical lives.

“If believing in God helps you be a better person,” he says, “or at least doesn't make you a worse person - then fine, believe in [God]. We encourage your belief.

If being an atheist helps you take more responsibility for creating a better world - or at least doesn't prevent you - then fine, don't believe in God. We encourage your atheism.

The only beliefs we don't want you to have in this church are the ones that lead you to hurt people.”<sup>5</sup>

His provocative title was getting at the fact that Unitarian Universalism is (contrary to some stereotypes) a difficult path to walk.

Because as we survey the landscape of a world in need, and consult many guides along the way, we can't help but notice how many wrong turns we take.

We often have to update our maps.

And we have to admit when we've gone wrong, when we're falling short, when we just haven't gotten there yet...and we know it.

We have to be willing to change course and try another way of walking sometimes.

Especially if the sources of insight that work best for us—whether they be our inner teacher, the God of our understanding, the wisdom of nature or the guidance of our elders—show us that we're on the wrong path.

Speaking for myself, I can't tell you how many times I still follow the direction of material things...of power and prestige...and of being right...

Even when my sources of insight teach me that “home” is another way.

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So, what is “home” exactly?

It's described differently depending on which map of wisdom you consult. But I'd venture to say it's a place—or rather a state of being—of love and compassion and peace.

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<sup>5</sup> Rev. Dr. Tony Larsen, “*Why You Should Not be a Unitarian Universalist*,” [http://downlode.org/Etext/why\\_not\\_unitarian.html](http://downlode.org/Etext/why_not_unitarian.html)

Author Thomas Moore describes it as “a more original self, [that] lies outside the time and space of our personal lives.”<sup>6</sup>

This open presence has been called the God or Christ within, or our Buddha-nature. It is the source of all wise direction.

We know it when we’re there.

And as we awaken to more compassionate ways of living, we do rest there from time to time.

It may be noticed only in brief moments at the beginning.  
But as we grow and deepen in our spiritual lives, we may find that we hang out there for longer periods.

When that happens, we might be less ruled by our desires to get to somewhere else, somewhere somehow better...or to get a fancier compass or more up-to-the-minute knapsack.

We might find that, at times, the way to get somewhere is to appear to go nowhere.

That the place we need to be is here and now...

That the maps are as close as our breath.  
That our guides are as close as our neighbours.



Photographer Tim Knox affirms this in something he calls “The Smile Project.”

He asks two strangers to stand side by side, tells them to look at each other and then asks one to smile.

Inevitably the second person smiles back, and he snaps the portrait of the two of them just at that transformative moment.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Moore, *Original Self: Living with Paradox and Originality* (New York: Perennial, 2000), 73.

In a recent article, Tim notes that every month, 55 million people type the words “How to be happy” into the Google search engine.<sup>7</sup>

His portraits suggest that we may not need Google to answer that question.

They suggest that the light within each of us, reflected in each other, may provide all the guidance we need.

It may allow us, for the brief time we’re here, to be at home in Being itself, in our shared humanity.

Maybe the miracle of the human journey is that, like Bobbie the Wonder Collie, we travel so very far, for so very long, to come home.

In the words of T.S. Eliot, found in our hymnbook, #685:

“We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
and know the place for the first time.”

Blessings to you all.

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<sup>7</sup> Sara and Robert Genn, “*The Smiling Game*,” The Painters Keys website, August 1, 2014. <http://clicks.robertgenn.com/smiling-game.php>