

# **“The Examined Life: Where Am I Going?”**

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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.

It was a crisp weekday morning,  
Autumn in Toronto in 1985.

I was 22 years old, enjoying life as an independent  
young woman, living on my own.

I'd recently landed my first job after university,  
and going to work each morning was a joy.

Wakened as usual by the alarm on my digital clock radio,  
I rose with energy that day.

I got dressed in my professional office clothes.

I ate a bowl of cereal and I headed out...  
locking the door on my cute little bachelor apartment  
on Dovercourt Road.

As I walked toward the streetcar stop,  
I realized I'd accidentally left my watch at home.

Meanwhile, it was slowly dawning on me that  
the dawn was strangely slow in coming.

The street seemed darker than usual,  
and it was a bit chillier too.

Still, I was focused on my workday ahead--  
in the advertising department of Eaton's,  
the department store still going strong at the time.

My horizons were bright!

Yet with each step I took, it was more clear  
that it was much too dark to be 8:30 in the morning.

Mustering up my courage, I asked the lone person  
at the streetcar stop what time it was.

Only to be told that it was, in fact, 5:30 a.m.

Somehow, I'd managed to set my digital clock incorrectly.  
And then, to make matters worse...

I'd managed to ignore all the signs around me that said:  
You might be going in the right direction...

But you're going at the wrong time!

## §

The "examined life" often leads us to see when  
our personal journeys have gone wrong.

Sometimes we realize right away,  
but often it takes some time to discover.

Looking back now at this still-embarrassing event,  
I see that it's every bit as good a metaphor  
as it is a funny story.

Indeed, as you examine your own lives,  
you may remember events that also fall  
into the tradition of “journey” tales.

Humans love to describe our lives as “journeys.”

We often ask ourselves “where are we going?”  
and try to set the best course.

Yet, as my story reveals,  
so often we’re simply making decisions  
moment by moment, based on our unique  
perspectives and circumstances...

And we’re often “in the dark,”  
even if we don’t realize it at the time.

But that’s no reason for despair.

When we approach life’s journey with  
compassion and curiosity,

We can find opportunities for growth and service...

Even if we don’t end up where we expect, or when.

### §

The spiritual writer and Catholic priest Henri Nouwen  
was someone who continually examined his life.

As a result, he often asked himself if he was headed in the right  
direction.

At one point in his life, after becoming a successful author, and  
holding a tenured position at Yale...  
and even trying out life in a monastery for awhile.

He felt he was called to work with the poor.

So he traveled to Latin America to do just that...  
only to find that he wasn't well suited to it...  
and he had to change direction once again.

After several years,  
and much prayer and soul-searching,  
he arrived at the L'Arche community  
for adults with intellectual disabilities  
founded by the Canadian, Jean Vanier.

It was at L'Arche Daybreak, north of Toronto,  
that, at last, Nouwen found himself at home.

## §

About the human journey, Nouwen wrote:

“One of the most radical demands for you and me is the discovery of  
our lives as a series of movements or passages.

When we're born, we leave our mother's womb for the larger,  
brighter world of the family.

It changes everything, and there is no going back.

When we go to school, we leave our homes and families  
and move to a larger community of people where our lives are  
forever larger and more expansive.

[Some of us may have children, and when they]  
leave us for more space and freedom...  
our lives may seem less meaningful.

It all keeps changing.

When we grow older, we retire or lose our jobs,  
and everything shifts again.

It seems as though we are always passing  
from one phase to the next,  
gaining and losing someone, some place, something. [...]

The losses remind you constantly that all isn't perfect  
and it doesn't always happen for you the way you expected. [...]

You [can] choose to live your losses as passages to  
anger, blame, hatred and resentment...

Or you [can] choose to let these losses be a passage to something  
new, something wider, and deeper.

The question is not how to avoid loss and make it not happen, but  
how to choose it as a passage,  
as an exodus to greater life and freedom.”<sup>1</sup>

## §

I don't know about you, but when I've asked myself  
“where am I going?” at different points in my life,

I've often been focused on the upward and outward—  
the achievement of new goals.

But seeing life instead as a series of passages,  
or gateways to wisdom and understanding

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<sup>1</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Finding My Way Home: Pathways to Life and the Spirit* (New York: Crossroads, 2001), 134-135.

changes the picture for me.

I start to see life not so much as traveling toward some destination...

But instead as a creative process of opening more and more to life and to love.

As Henri Nouwen suggests, in such a process, the losses and mistakes and “wrong turns” might be just as important as the goals I achieve.

As I struggle to understand sometimes, growing in the spiritual life is not about “onward and upward” but about “inward and downward.”

Whatever path we take in life, we’ll encounter challenges that we could not avoid—indeed, many of our own making.

Our task is to find a way to respond to our circumstances with the kindness and grace that allows us to care for others and the world...wherever we find ourselves.

Wherever that may be, we can discover ways to give of ourselves and to assist others in their journeys.

That’s certainly true this morning, as we have the opportunity to support not only our own congregation, but also children in Ghana made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS...as we support the work of the Unitarian Universalist Office of the United Nations.

In Africa, more than 14 million children have lost one or both parents to AIDS.

The “Every Child is Our Child” program provides many of them with school supplies and health care...

...allowing us to expand our horizons of what it means to be a congregation that “connects” and “serves”.

Support of the UU-UNO has been part of First Unitarian’s journey for many years...

...and our work with the United Nations is aligned with the Unitarian 6<sup>th</sup> Principle:

“The goal of world community, with peace, liberty and justice for all.”

## §

Our paths are intertwined with each other’s... and there are opportunities for growth at every point along the way.

We know these things to be true.

And yet, that knowledge doesn’t stop us from setting out on personal quests of so many kinds.

As human beings, we like to set goals and priorities... and we’re pretty darn good at it.

Like Dorothy Gale singing “Over the Rainbow,”

We set out upon a path,  
intent on meeting some wizard,  
who might grant us our heart’s desire.

We're willing to travel far and wide,  
through frightening "gales" of many kinds,

Only to find, if we're lucky and awake,  
that what we've been seeking  
is as close as our own backyard...

And that we've been safe at home all along.

This message is at the heart of so many wisdom stories.

No matter how far we may travel,  
No matter how lost we may seem,

We are always at home...

In the present moment...  
In the love of God...  
in the Web of Life.

## §

In the poem I read earlier, John O'Donohue wrote:

"May you travel in an awakened way,  
gathered wisely into your inner ground,  
That you may not waste the invitations  
Which wait along the way to transform you."<sup>2</sup>

I've always read his poem "For the Traveler"  
as a blessing for a physical journey...  
but of course it can be seen as a blessing  
for an inner journey as well.

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<sup>2</sup> John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 54.

As we move through life, we hope to stay aware of the signs that point us toward the best choices at the time.

But, as I learned on that pre-dawn morning decades ago, it's all too easy to be so fixed on our destination that we completely lose our way.

I was oblivious to the dark that morning.

And there are many ways I can stay unaware today... as I stay doggedly focused on whatever I currently see as my heart's desire.

Fortunately, with a shift in perspective that can come from reflection, prayer, a conversation with a good friend, or simply the passage of time, our priorities can change dramatically.

Suddenly we might see a path that is better suited to us. A timetable that makes more sense. Or a companion we might need for the journey.

We might see the need to let go of some agenda.

Or to pause for awhile...as I did that morning.

With nothing to do, and not enough time to go back to sleep, I believe I made myself another cup of coffee and watched the sun come up...

All while shaking my head in wonder at how unaware I had been.

## §

So where are we headed now?

Some of us may be simply putting one foot in front of the other during a difficult passage.

Some may find that our journeys are so deeply intertwined with those of others, such as our family members, that it's impossible to ask "where am I going?" without asking "where are we going?"

Some today may be called by urgent goals of social need or climate justice...

Indeed, one of Shawn's and my colleagues in ministry wrote this week to say...

...that the recent report of the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is now calling his goals into question.

Calling him to revise some personal maps.

Finding now that we're in a darker time than we may have realized, many of us may be feeling deeply disoriented or frightened.

Wondering what to do next...what path to take.

This is simply where we are,  
as new awareness is coming to light,  
and it's not an easy place to be.

But if we approach our life's journey  
with an open heart...

Acknowledging everything we feel...including  
the darker emotions as well as the light ones...

We can become more and more  
present to the world and to our fellow travelers...  
during what is, without question, a difficult passage.

To paraphrase another reflection of Henri Nouwen:

“The question of where to live and what to do is really insignificant  
compared to the question of how to keep the eyes of my heart  
[focused on love].<sup>3</sup>

I believe that when the eyes of our hearts are focused in this way, we  
are better able to see the unique opportunities awaiting each of us, to  
meet the needs of the world.

## §

At the end of our service we'll sing a rousing gospel hymn:  
“Come and go with me to that land.”

What exactly is that land?

I believe it is a wider world of peace and justice...  
and I also believe it is a loving and justice-making  
peace in the heart.

Call it “enlightenment”

Call it “freedom”

This is the hope to which we are “bound.”

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<sup>3</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, with Michael J. Christensen & Rebecca Laird, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 107.

To which we are headed...  
in our personal forward-looking directions...

and to which we are “bound” inextricably...  
as human beings who are part of an evolving  
and co-creating Wholeness.

Knowing that we are bound to that whole...  
breathing in the awareness that we are  
part of Something More...

We may take embark on our personal passages  
with greater peace and assurance.

We may travel more easily with others  
and with ourselves...even when we endure  
losses and challenges on the journey.

We may even find joy and laughter along our paths...  
even, or especially, at times when we realize  
we have lost our way...

That we need to start again, at the beginning.

In the words of Dorothy Gale:  
“If we ever go looking for our heart’s desire again,  
we need not look any further than our own backyard...”

May our hearts be open today...  
to the love all around us...  
and deep within us...

Wherever we may go.

