

PATHWAYS, TRAVEL and the JOURNEY part II

The Intellectual Academic Philosophical Journey

As I suggested in part I last week, we each journey through life in our own time and at our own pace. There are many ways of telling the story of our journeys and many reasons why we might emphasize some facets and some episodes of our journeys differently depending on our audience. Telling our stories is a way to connect with others, to introduce and explain ourselves to see what commonalities we might share with others. Some parts of our story are held close, too tender to share, while others are basic facts of our journeys. Last week I addressed the outer physical layer of the journey by telling some of the facts of where my journey has led physically, the places where I have lived and visited with just a few thoughts about what those places meant. Today I wish to address the intellectual, academic, and philosophical aspects of our journeys, for which I will again tell some of my story in hopes of engaging you in thought and memory about these parts of your journeys. Next week in part III I intend to address the psycho-spiritual and emotional aspects of the journey.

Three key words of this part of the journey for me, and probably for most Unitarian Universalists, are curiosity, exploration, and discovery. With my recent visit to see my kids in Phoenix, I continued to enjoy watching my youngest grandchild, who will have his first birthday this week, begin to explore his world! He was walking pretty well by the time I saw him a couple weeks ago—very different from the hesitant steps over Memorial Day weekend. He only had a few words but was making lots of sounds, mostly he could say mama, dada, and bye-bye! He was all over his world exploring: toys, cupboards, shelves, baking stuff, and especially electronics, phones and I-pads when he could get them! It was fun to watch the wheels spin and the twinkle in his eye as he discovered something new, usually something he shouldn't get into! Curiosity, exploration, and discovery, words Lucas won't learn for a while yet, but the exact words to describe his journey!

Elementary and secondary schools have been getting a bad rap for many years now as one of the main targets of the culture wars. Creative teaching has long taken a back seat to test preparation, so that kids will meet those basic goals set out for them by some educational experts trying to justify and quantify the educational experience to legislators hot to cut funding at every level. Rote learning of facts and the culturally acceptable story has become far more important to legislators than is the encouragement of bright and creative minds and the effort to find things at which each student is successful. Fortunately there are still many great teachers in almost every school, but poor pay and being judged only on arbitrary testing standards has discouraged many from the educational field. Curiosity, exploration, and discovery are not even on the agenda in many classrooms even though they make all the difference!

Academic accomplishments can make a huge difference in the course of our lives. Abilities in the sciences and math are particularly sought after as preparation for work in the fields of engineering, the sciences, and mathematics. Training in business and finance seems to be more popular than anything else these days. Somehow getting rich still doesn't have the appeal to me that exploration has always had. When I was in elementary school, I dreamed of going into space or maybe exploring the oceans. The Astronauts, movies, and the original Star Trek kept me excited about space, and Jacques Cousteau offered fascinating glimpses into the oceans! My favorite recreational reading is still science fiction, especially stories that span the universe! And I love to be where I can look up and see the sky full of stars at night!

I was pretty serious about astronomy and oceanography even into my middle school years, but as the reality of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement affected me, I began to consider ministry. My Physics teacher told me that questions I was asking were metaphysical, beyond the scope of the experimental sciences. I saw some of my favorite ministers standing up for social justice and I began to think that ministry could offer a way to care for people who were struggling as well as a way to speak out for justice. When I registered for the draft, I filed a statement with the draft board that should the draft be renewed, I intended to file for exemption as a conscientious objector.

I was fortunate to be a good student in pretty much every field, including math and the sciences. Most years I enjoyed school and didn't have to put forth much effort to get good grades. I was especially good at taking multiple guess tests! School was easy for me, a safe and familiar environment.

When my brother was almost killed and badly burned in a car accident over Christmas break my senior year of high school, I was distracted from other considerations and so only applied to the colleges of Engineering at Minnesota and Illinois and was accepted at both. I started at the University of Illinois in Fall of '75 with I think about 19 free semester hours from my test scores. I did discover that I had to work harder for grades in college, and Calculus particularly provided some serious shock therapy from which I managed to pull out a C. By the end of my first semester I had pretty well decided that I was not that interested in being an Engineer, so that by the end of the second semester when I had almost enough hours to qualify as a junior and the College of Engineering would not let me transfer to Liberal Arts and the University would not let me leave the dorms, I was ready to transfer to a more accommodating school. I learned a lot about myself and the world at the U of I, not least in the field of institutional politics! A friend and I transferred to Northern Illinois University, where I completed a Contract Major I wrote in Religious Studies in 2 more years.

At the U of I, I had begun taking Religion, Sociology and Philosophy courses. At Northern Illinois I added Anthropology and History courses. My professor for Comparative Religions at the U of I was a UU. I can't remember without digging out old transcripts where I took my first Psychology course, but by the time I finished my Bachelor's Degree, I almost had minors in Philosophy, Anthropology, and Psychology! I received a broad liberal education, the more so because I sought out wisdom and knowledge from several fields. In this era of specialization, I was prepared either to work in a coffee shop or to enter seminary.

In the fall of '78 I began at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary, the United Methodist school in Evanston, IL. The classes were interesting, but the institution was still going through the transition of absorbing the faculty of Evangelical Theological Seminary after the merger of English and German strands that created United Methodism. Garrett had been one of the 2 most liberal Methodist Schools, Evangelical was far more conservative. I soon learned that 2 gay students had been expelled for coming out of the closet the previous quarter and other gay and lesbian students were being very cautious about their identities. The recent more public struggle for acceptance by LGBTQ persons seeking acceptance as United Methodist Ministers has actually been going on for at least 40 years. I was concerned for fellow students, but at the time peace and justice were more vital issues for me. The final straw for me at Garrett Evangelical was the shabby treatment received by commuting students. On my birthday that fall, I spent 4 hours getting to campus in a snow storm, abandoning my car at an EL station when highway travel became impossible, only to discover that classes had been cancelled. I completed the semester and withdrew, soon transferring to Bethany Theological Seminary, of the Church of the Brethren, where I joined a small enclave of Methodists within that historic Peace church school. I had discovered my pacifist tendencies in high school and appreciated the opportunity to explore them with the help of the Church of the Brethren. I remain a hair's breadth away from Pacifism to this day and am generally opposed to war.

Between college and seminary, I read great works of philosophy, theology and church history, psychology and anthropology, as well as various other matters. I have always felt that I received a very good education in matters ancient and modern. I cross registered and returned to Garrett-Evangelical for classes in United Methodist history and polity. After the course work and an intern year in ministry, I left seminary with my Master of Divinity in June of '82, ready to lead a church, ready to serve a congregation, ready to make a difference. But even with all those wonderful classes, my education had really just begun!

I understand why new ministers coming out of seminary abandon so much of what they have learned about the formation of the Bible when they get into a church. Most congregations are not ready to hear the discoveries learned from Biblical Criticism, careful comparisons of similar texts, and understanding of the cultural context in which books of the Bible were written, and the frequent translation issues apparent with study of the Greek, Hebrew, and Latin manuscripts available. Even aided by excellent resources on Bible studies and Church history, people in the congregations mostly want to be comforted through challenging times rather than having their simple faith called into question. Some people in some congregations are ready for deeper questions, but many want simple answers even when those answers are wrong. I frequently got in trouble with people in my United Methodist congregations by raising issues coming from my theological studies. Being a diplomatic peacemaker, I usually could help people get past such issues, but the effort often took a toll on me.

Through my studies, as well as through my lifelong church involvement, I wanted to find honest answers that were true to the spirit of Jesus, but after a few years in ministry, a divorce, and some other struggles, I was ready for new ways of seeing when I applied to the Institute for Culture and Creation Spirituality in 1989. Over the years, I had taken a couple of college courses, participated in several continuing education workshops, and completed a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education. I forget now how the question was worded, but the one essay question on the application encouraged people on the basis of all their history to express what they hoped to get from the ICCS experience. It was a wonderful question which really helped me to get excited about studying at ICCS and struggling with Matt Fox's ideas. I still remember working on that question, and I certainly remember all the good things that happened at ICCS.

ICCS was sort of like Montessori for adults, including lots of self-directed learning within a broad but inclusive framework of possibilities. Only a couple things were required, the weekly forum and small groups. Masters students were expected to pick between 3 tracks and to take some classes related to those tracks. My track was something along the lines of psychology and

counseling, while Jane's was Deep Ecumenism, and I think the third involved organizing for social justice. Each semester we were also required to take Art as Meditation courses, such as dreamwork, photography, painting, massage, Dances of Universal Peace, the Shamanic Journey, Gregorian Chant and others I can't think of at the moment! Everything was pass/fail and failure was almost impossible. The experience was wonderful, supportive and creative. It would have been hard not to find renewal in such an experience!

Now even though my intellectual journey is unique to me, I hope it has been illustrative of several points. One major point I wish to highlight is that the journey is filled with decision points at which we choose to go down one path and not another. Whether we take less or more traveled paths may be as much accident as it is volition, but we each face choices along the way. Another point about our choices is that they may be forced by institutional roadblocks of one kind or another but that when one door shuts a proverbial window will likely open. Most of us by the time we are working adults can cite one or several times some accident seemingly turned out in our favor while other accidents may have worked against us. Another point is that even those for whom some things come easily likely have to work hard in other areas. Few if any people live a completely charmed life.

Over the years, I have met a few people who could articulate a clear philosophy of life that seemingly worked well for them. My own experience is more suggestive of an ongoing series of accidents, decisions, reactions, and periods of going with the flow! If I were to articulate a philosophy of life it would be something like, Do as little harm as possible while having a reasonably good time, but hey, I am a process person!

Do good out there, be safe, and have a good time! Peace, out!