

On Setting Out and Coming Home

BY JOSHUA MASON PAWELEK, MINISTER,
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SOCIETY: EAST MANCHESTER, CONNECTICUT

Matsuo Bashō, the late 17th century Japanese poet, speaks of a strong desire to wander, as if it's the essence of who he is. In the opening lines of his travel sketch, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, he says: "The gods seemed to have possessed my soul and turned it inside out, and roadside images seemed to invite me from every corner, so that it was impossible for me to stay idle at home." Throughout all his travel sketches he seems always to be setting out on a journey, leaving home, leaving friends. We might call him, in those haunting words of the Sufi poet Rumi, "a lover of leaving."

At the conclusion of *The Narrow Road*, Bashō speaks of a wonderful reunion with friends. "Everybody was overjoyed to see me as if I had returned unexpectedly from the dead." But his homecoming is short-lived. Though filled with the fatigue of journeying, he sets out again, and offers this final poem:

*As firmly cemented clam shells
Fall apart in autumn,
So I must take to the road again.
Farewell my friends.*

In contrast to Bashō's relentless journeying, I note the story of a friend's 81-year old grandmother who returned to her beloved Scotland after 57 years of absence. Her homecoming, like Bashō's reunion with friends, is joyous. It's also a dramatic and heart-warming story: going back to the place of her birth, seeing long-lost family members after more than half a century. But where Bashō is always setting out, the grandmother's journey is one of returning, coming home.

On your own spiritual journey, are you setting out or coming home?

Unitarian Universalists often say things like, "Our lives are spiritual journeys." But we don't always explain what this means. Where some religions offer specific paths toward specific goals (which makes the journey relatively easy to explain), others, like Unitarian Universalism, are more open-ended, with directions less specified and paths more numerous, with spontaneity, creativity and curiosity more valued than the discipline of sticking to pre-ordained rules.

This open-endedness does make the typical Unitarian Universalist spiritual journey more difficult to explain. (In fact, it makes the word *typical* more or less useless.) But even so, I think it's important that we find ways of articulating what we mean when we say, "Our lives are spiritual journeys."

For me, spirituality is fundamentally about connection. An effective spiritual practice connects us to some reality larger than ourselves: family, humanity, nature, the land, life, the planet, the cosmos, spirit, divinity, the gods and goddesses, the ancestors. When I speak of our spiritual lives, I mean all the ways we connect to whatever is of utmost worth to us, what we hold sacred and regard as holy.

When I speak of our spiritual journeys, I'm referring not so much to the full span of our lives, but to certain discrete portions of our lives: the journey of our young adult years, the journey of parenting, the journey of career, the journey into elderhood. I'm speaking of our journey through certain ordeals or challenges, such as losing a job, the break-up of a marriage, the death of a loved one.

What makes any of these journeys spiritual is that they enable us to deepen our sense of connection over time. But we don't necessarily recognize this when it's happening. At various points along the way, however, when we have a moment to pause



Quest

Vol. LXX, No 10

November 2015

One does not
discover new lands
without consenting to
lose sight of the shore
for a very long time.

— André Gide

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT JOURNEY

- ON SETTING OUT AND COMING HOME
Joshua Mason Pawelek
- TRAIL BLAZERS AND COVENANT
KEEPERS
Sue Phillips
- MAP OF THE JOURNEY IN
PROGRESS
Victoria Safford
- PILGRIMS ALWAYS (EXCERPT)
Tom Owen-Towle
- FROM YOUR MINISTER
Meg Riley
- RESOURCES FOR LIVING
Lynn Ungar
- TRAINS
Florence Caplow

and reflect on our lives, we might notice that we've completed some significant journey or that we've come through some uniquely challenging experience, and we're not the same person we were when we started. We possess some knowledge about life and living we didn't possess when we started, or we are wiser than when we began. Maybe we feel more whole, more at ease in the world, more comfortable in our own skin.

Perhaps, at the end of a journey, we realize we are better able to give and receive love; perhaps we are more compassionate in our treatment of others; perhaps we've discovered our gifts and are finally using them in service of others. We might have come to terms with a painful loss, or even with the reality of our own death. All of this suggests to me that through the course of our journeying we have deepened our connections to those things we hold sacred.

But we don't always realize we're embarking on a spiritual journey. More often than not our journeys begin with a twinge, a gnawing in the back of our mind or at the edge of our heart, a discomfort or dissonance, a low-level anxiety, a frustration; a sense that something in our life is out of alignment, a sense that something is lacking, or a longing we're slowly beginning to recognize but aren't quite sure how to fulfill. We may feel this way because some new situation has arisen—a baby has come, a job has been lost, an aging parent has moved in—and we more or less know our life needs to change. Or it may just be a twinge with no apparent source.

That twinge, that gnawing, that longing—if it's real—doesn't go away. It begins to take on the quality of voice. It questions and cajoles, it makes gentle pleas and strident demands. The word *calling* is appropriate here. This voice, however we experience it, calls us toward a deeply felt passion, calls us to pursue some different, perhaps more noble purpose. It calls us to grow in

knowledge and wisdom, to meet whatever challenge confronts us. We might hear it in the voice of a spouse or a good friend, a boss or a co-worker. We might hear it in the voice of our minister, or the voice of our doctor, or maybe in the voice of a total stranger.

We might hear it as our inner voice: that still, small voice of our most authentic self that knows what we really want for our lives, even before our waking minds know. We might hear it as a voice from without: a holy voice, a sacred voice, a divine voice, a spirit voice. We might hear it in our dreams, in prayer, in meditation, in the shower, while exercising, stretching, singing,

This voice, however we
experience it, calls us
toward a deeply felt pas-
sion, calls us to pursue
some different, perhaps
more noble purpose.

dancing, creating. When we finally respond to the voice, when we finally start to move, I find we tend to move in one of two directions. Either we're setting out, or we're coming home.

We set out when we feel stuck where we are, when we need something new, some connection we've never had, some knowledge we cannot acquire by staying home. We set out when we feel constrained and need freedom, when we find it hard to breathe and we need the fresh air of the open road. The work of setting out includes experimenting, exploring, creating, searching. Setting out requires courage, curiosity, strength, nerve, an adventurous spirit, a willingness to take risks, even arrogance at times. Bashō's travel sketches are a wonderful example of setting out. For him, home is a place of idleness. He goes stir-crazy. On the road he is alive and passionate. On the road he expects to catch glimpses of eternity and let it inspire his poetry.

I find a similar spiritual mentality in the 19th century American poet, Walt Whitman, who wrote in his poem, "Song of the Open Road:

*Afoot and light-hearted I take to the
open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me
leading wherever I choose.
Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I
myself am good-fortune;
Henceforth I whimper no more,
postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints,
libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open
road.*

Again, a yearning for freedom, a confident, adventurous spirit, a willingness to cut ties, a desire to explore. This is setting out.

We come home when we're longing for foundations, for roots, for love, intimacy, care and nurture. We come home when we're yearning for community, for familiar faces and places, familiar food, smell, touch, land, seasons. The work of coming home includes listening, sharing, sacrificing, forgiving and building community. Coming home requires its own kinds of courage and strength, its own kinds of persistence and endurance. It requires vulnerability, humility, and a willingness to set one's own needs aside at times to meet the needs of others.

If you ask me about my spiritual journey, these days I lean towards coming home. Don't get me wrong: I value setting out. It's been very important in shaping my sense of who I am and what I value. But my instinct is that home is becoming more and more elusive in our era. I won't rehearse the litany of ills that beset families or the social and economic conditions that make it increasingly difficult to build and sustain vital neighborhoods and communities.

Suffice to say, I experience many forces in the larger world that drive wedges between people who ought to be in community together, who ought to be

encountering each other with loving, compassionate hearts, who ought to be working together for the common good, who ought to see beyond the narrow tunnel of their own self-interest. This is the source of my twinge, my gnawing, my low-level anxiety, my longing. The voices I hear—in my dreams, in prayer, in meditation, in the shower; while exercising, stretching, singing, dancing, creating—all urge me to come more fully home.

Wherever you are on your journey, whether you are setting out on a grand adventure or settling into the fullness of home, may you remember that we journey in a web of connections that support our setting out and our coming home. ■

CLF Nominating Committee Seeks Leaders

FROM THE CLF NOMINATING COMMITTEE: **REBECCA SCOTT, KAY MONTGOMERY, CHARLES DU MOND, DENNY DAVIDOFF.**

The Church of the Larger Fellowship's Nominating Committee seeks CLF members to run for positions on the Board of Directors beginning June 2016:

- **Directors:** three for 3-year terms
- **Treasurer:** for a one-year term
- **Clerk:** for a one-year term

Board members set CLF policy and approve the budget. The Board meets face to face twice annually and periodically by conference calls.

For more information, including Frequently Asked Questions, visit www.clfuu.org/boardofdirectors/nominating. You may nominate yourself or another CLF member for any of these positions.

Please contact the CLF office at nominating@clfuu.org or 617-948-6166 by **January 15, 2016**, with your nominations. ■



Trail Blazers and Covenant Keepers

BY **SUE PHILLIPS**, UUA'S

REGIONAL LEAD FOR NEW ENGLAND,
JAMAICA PLAIN, MASSACHUSETTS

As a little girl I ran away from home at least twice every summer, hurling myself out of the house with outrage at childhood oppressions like being left out by my brother and his friends or facing bad sportsmanship during a T-ball game. I'd hastily make a bologna and cheese sandwich, pack a napkin, a baseball and whatever book I was reading, and charge out of the house, full of nine-year-old indignation. My little sister Julie panicked and cried by the front door. I was Never Going Back. Ever.

The problem was I never knew where to go. My little world extended only a few blocks in any direction. Narnia's secret wardrobe was hidden in a house a world away. The wrinkle in time I dreamed about was equally unreachable, tucked away in the book I loved. Those places weren't fiction to me. I could have told you all about the path Bilbo had taken from the Shire to Rivendell, but going out my own front door in those steamy Midwestern summers, I didn't know where to go, much less how to get there.

All I could think to do was run away. When I was a girl, leaving was journey enough to ease my anger and disappointment, and my longing.

Twenty-five years later, when I first walked into a Unitarian Universalist church, I was propelled, like so many others, by longing for a richer, more meaningful life. I had heard that within UUism I might chart my own spiritual course and find my own way on my journey. This promise of freedom appealed to my spiritual pride and isolated independence. I had no way of knowing then what I do now, that the

most profound gift of our faith has been *not* having to chart my own course. Unitarian Universalism has given me a path laid down and blazed by others.

On the treeless granite ledges of New Hampshire's White Mountains, trail keepers have built stone cairns every ten feet on trails crossing the stark landscape so that hikers can crawl to safety during the area's notoriously dangerous winter weather. In Spain, wayside crosses mark pilgrim paths. Painted white triangles guide hikers across the long Appalachian Trail. In the dense forests of Eastern Europe, colored stripes signal direction and terrain. In every time and culture, using the tools and materials of the day, trailblazers have marked paths through untraveled territory, leaving behind blazes to signal the way for those who follow.

Every journey (even an anger-fueled childhood escape) begins with a single step. But often times starting is the easy part. Even when we know the horizon we are moving toward, it sure helps to know how to get there. Spiritual journeys, too. As Unitarian Universalists, we may take that first step on our own, but we don't have to find the way by ourselves. Our ancestors have cut a path and posted blazes on the trail. Their wilderness may have been different, but their hearts were not. We can still find the blazes they left for us, shining and flickering along the path.

The path our ancestors laid for us is covenant.

Covenant is the collection of sacred promises we make to ourselves, to the Holy, and to each other on the journey of a faithful life. It is the explicit declaration of our deepest intentions. As powerful as those promises are, our ancestors knew that covenant is more than a thing, more than a noun. They knew that covenant is also a verb—the process of making, practicing, failing at and re-making those promises.

Our ancestors teach us that religious life thrives at the intersection of self, community and Spirit, and that the beauty and fullness of faithful lives emerge everywhere these dimensions meet and walk together. Covenant is the path along which meaning is discovered, practiced and shared. The rich landscape of covenant helps us understand how to discover, how to practice, and how to share.

If we each walk alone, charting our own course every which way, it is not possible to be religious people. We may be able to practice spirituality by ourselves, but it is by walking with others in service of our highest aspirations that personal spirituality transmutes into religious community. Religion—our religion—requires that we walk with others.

Our trailblazing ancestors teach us that covenant is the way we claim and are claimed by our faith and by the holy. Claiming and being claimed is the heart of covenant. It is the activating impulse that connects our personal commitments in community, drawing individuals together with Spirit to co-create a world of love and justice.

As Unitarian Universalists, we choose to walk together not on command but because we are called to walk a certain path, and because we answer that call. Covenant is both the call and the answer. This is our tradition and our birthright as Unitarian Universalists.

When I first came stumbling into Unitarian Universalism from the spiritual wilderness, I had not yet learned how desperate I was for a well-trodden path. I had no frame of reference for how much the old songs and liturgies could teach me. *Covenant* was just a flat, vaguely menacing Old Testament word. I did not yet know to look for the blazes our ancestors had lovingly left for me to follow.

As Unitarians and Universalists and Unitarian Universalists, the collective “we” have walked a long path. We have allowed our beliefs to change

over the long years according to conscience and science and revelation. We have managed to stay together even as the core Christian story receded into one among many wisdom stories. Our people have integrated the rationality of science, the intuition of Transcendentalism and the ethics of humanism. Together, we have worked theological miracles. We have managed to stay connected as communities of faith through radical changes in our collective beliefs. Covenant—the shared commitment to and practice of religious community—is how we have stayed together.

The call to covenant is there at the heart of our faith, an echo from our shared past.

And yet, we are a people of competing commitments. The freedom of belief which has helped us remain flexible in light of new revelation and experience has also weakened our binding ties. We value interconnection but are cautious about asking much of each other. As individuals and groups we want to belong, but are reluctant to be claimed. This tension between freedom and connection is also our birthright.

Our collective anxiety about this tension, and the resulting deification of individual conscience, have squashed the rich dimensionality of covenant until it has become synonymous with a vague sense of commitment to a vague set of principles. We have abstractified covenant into spiritual cohabitation, where simply being on a journey together seems to be enough. Covenant lives on as a metaphor for interconnection in our movement, but it is a bird grounded with a broken wing.

The call to covenant is there at the heart of our faith, an echo from our shared past. We sense that deep interconnection, we preach it, and we rely on it. But covenant is more than

impulse and echo. It must be activated intentionally for the full power of liberal religion—and a liberal religious life—to be revealed.

The forces of dissolution and disconnection are strong. Our people come to Unitarian Universalism to help navigate and withstand all that alienates us from meaning and connection. Putting covenant back at the center of community life could give us a powerful way to claim and be claimed by community and by all that is holy.

I am always getting lost in the woods. Every time I wander from a path that is literally beaten into the ground by previous feet, I lose my way. This hurts my pride. I’m not a wandering-around sort of person in my “real life.” I need those trails and the trail markers along the way. I know this from getting lost. I also know this from church.

Sometimes we are the trailblazers breaking new ground for people to follow. Sometimes we are the desperate, lost hiker crawling on hands and knees to the next guiding cairn. May we also be the faithful people who learn together how to see the blazes on the path. May we call each other back when we lose our way along the journey. And may we open ourselves up to claiming and being claimed by covenant as we go. ■

“The only journey is the one within.” —Rainer Maria Rilke

The CLF offers opportunities to journey both within and with others through a variety of online contacts, from reading and writing to streaming video offerings, such as our worship services and The VUU weekly talk show. Help us continue to offer materials for those who seek to go deeper in their journey within! Please make a gift of \$100 today, either online at www.clfuu.org/give or at 1-800-231-3027. Your gift helps make *Quest Monthly* possible. Thank you!

Map of the Journey in Progress



BY VICTORIA SAFFORD,
SENIOR MINISTER, WHITE BEAR
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
CHURCH, MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA

Here is where I found my voice and chose to be brave.

Here's a place where I forgave someone, against my better judgment, and I survived that, and unexpectedly, amazingly, I became wiser.

Here's where I was once forgiven, was ready for once in my life to receive forgiveness and to be transformed. And I survived that also. I lived to tell the tale.

This is the place where I said no, more loudly than I'd thought I ever could, and everybody stared, but I said no loudly anyway, because I knew it must be said, and those staring settled down

into harmless, ineffective grumbling, and over me they had no power anymore.

Here's a time, and here's another, when I laid down my fear and walked right on into it, right up to my neck into that roiling water.

Here's where cruelty taught me something. Here's where I was first astonished by gratuitous compassion and knew it for the miracle it was, the requirement it is. It was a trembling time.

And here, much later, is where I returned the blessing, clumsily. It wasn't hard, but I was unaccustomed. It cycled round, and as best I could I sent it back on out, passed the gift along. This circular motion, around and around, has no apparent end.

Here's a place, a murky puddle, where I have stumbled more than once and fallen. I don't know yet what to learn there.

On this site I was outraged and the rage sustains me still; it clarifies my seeing.

And here's where something caught me—a warm breeze in late winter, birdsong in late summer.

Here's where I was told that something was wrong with my eyes, that I see the world strangely, and here's where I said, "Yes, I know, I walk in beauty."

Here is where I began to look with my own eyes and listen with my ears and sing my own song, shaky as it is.

Here is where, as if by surgeon's knife, my heart was opened up—and here, and here, and here, and here.

These are the landmarks of conversion.

From Victoria Safford's book Walking Toward Morning, published by Skinner House Books in 2003, and available through the UUA bookstore (www.uuabookstore.org). ■

Pilgrims Always

BY TOM OWEN-TOWLE,
CO-MINISTER EMERITUS,
ALONGSIDE CAROLYN SHEETS
OWEN-TOWLE, OF FIRST UU
CHURCH OF SAN DIEGO



At core, we Unitarian Universalists are wonderers and wanderers; *pilgrim* seems to capture the balance of focused aim and fluid adventure so integral to Unitarian Universalism.

Here's my version of the pilgrim's progress: some seven characteristics of this way of being religious.

Pilgrims Wander Alone and Accompanied

It's essential to a healthy spiritual life to maintain equilibrium between the two poles of existence, moving agilely back and forth between being apart and sharing kinship. Pilgrims travel alone and in company with others.

Pilgrims Amble Purposefully Religious life is holy when it's

purposeful. The soles of our feet must advance in service of the souls of our beings. As pilgrims we keep traveling toward our ultimate human destination: namely, serving goodness and beauty while healing the earth.

Pilgrims are Visionaries

Visionaries enable others to perceive and embody hope. We yank brothers and sisters out of ruts, spurring one another beyond mediocrity, exhorting cohorts toward noble destinations. Pilgrims live not on the brink, but rather in the very midst of life's mysteries and harmonies, summoning others to join us there. Yes, we'll fall short, but we stay on the road.

Pilgrims Report a Strenuous Journey

Remember that the word *travel* is etymologically related to the word *travail*. Genuine religion has nothing to do with a pain-free, undemanding entrance into enlightenment. The way of pilgrims on an exodus is a life-long quest, replete with harsh stretches of

body and soul, a trek not for the fainthearted.

Pilgrims Are Marked by Passionate Equanimity

As pilgrims we travel with zestfulness rather than nonchalance. Deep sentiments such as sorrow, love, and joy are outgrowths of a fervent soul. Passion fuels our compassion.

Pilgrims Travel Leanly and Lightheartedly

True pilgrims travel with a light spirit and few belongings. They embrace living, then give themselves over to dying.

Pilgrims Roam as Trustful Agnostics

Ultimately I'm not sure of my destination; I remain trustfully agnostic. I keep plodding, I keep my eyes on the prize, and I harbor enough faith, hope and love in my soul to stay on my chosen course.

For you and I are pilgrims on a sacred journey. ■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

When I was a young adult, my inner and outer life resembled a Taoist poem I had memorized (and now only partly remember). It began, “There’s no path in front of you; that’s the track of your own foot...” and ended, “I speak of the road the butterfly cuts.”

The road the butterfly cuts—loopy and unpredictable, stopping often to languish in the depth of a flower—felt like an accurate description of both what I did with my time and of my sense of who I was in the world of that era. Every day felt both rife with possibility and overwhelmingly full of things I thought I should know but didn’t. What did I want to do with my life? What gifts did I have that I wanted to share with the world? Who were my people? Was there “a person” for me? Where was my place? All of those questions were manifested in a daily journey through exquisite heights and torturous depths.

Most young adults are fabulous at connecting with other people, interacting with others as mirrors and windows, and I was no exception. A 15-minute wait at the bus stop might result in a new friend or love interest. Plans were perpetually open; the places I lived were full of someone’s old friends coming through town, spur of the moment road-trips and impromptu dinner parties. I hope that this is still the same for young adults. Those late-night, soul-searching conversations and adventures of every variety were critically important to my journey.

Gradually, life fell into patterns. While in my heart and mind that butterfly might still be cutting around the cosmos, I mostly settled down. From the outside, it might even look as if I had a plan for my life. At some point, rela-

tionships and work experiences started to be counted in years, not days or weeks or months. At still another point, they began to be counted in decades.

The Hindus have named four stages of life, and though the descriptions were created for males in India long, long ago, I have felt the truth of them myself. The first stage, when the butterfly soaks in all life as one giant classroom, is the student stage, *Brahmacharya*. The second stage—this one I’ve been in now for a few decades as I raise a child and devote primary attention to work—is *Grihastha*, the householder stage.

The maps we consult affect how we see our journey.

What comes next is called *Vranaprastha*, the hermit stage. Traditionally, if I were a man in India I might have gone to live in a hut in a forest to meditate and study sacred texts. As a woman in the United States, I may be different in honoring the urge for more depth and less tending-of-things by, say, downsizing my living space and simplifying my life in other ways. The final stage of life for Hindus is the “wandering recluse,” *Sannyasa*, who renounces all attachments.

For me, that Hindu roadmap of the spirit’s life journey is the most helpful one I’ve encountered—even as I acknowledge that it was designed for a religion, culture, and people far different from me.

In the world I inhabit, we tend to label the stages with less interest and more judgment. The student stage is pretty much the same, but then we call the householder stage “settling down,” and we pretty much expect people to get there as fast as they can and stay there as long as they can. We locate people’s value in this stage of life, measuring their worth primarily by productivity (work) and consumption (goods).

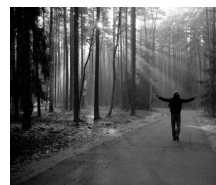
That we see the world this way is a clear measure of how much capitalism affects every cell in our collective body. And what a loss! Because for the Hindus, the life of the spirit has not yet really even begun.

The ascetic stage—relinquishing what has been and focusing elsewhere—is generally called by two names in the west—midlife crisis and retirement. Midlife crisis (as if we were going to live to 110 or 120!) is often used disdainfully to explain divorces, sudden impulses to quit a longstanding job or acquire some flashy new possession. It is shorthand for a restlessness that boils over, suddenly sensitive to “settling” as a negative thing.

And the word retirement implies that people are simply going to go languish somewhere, perhaps on a divan, sipping beverages and remembering the past. Neither encapsulates the spiritual urge to trim to essentials, to cultivate a focus on being rather than doing.

Regarding the final stage identified by the Hindus—“wandering ascetic”—western culture is particularly cruel. Rather than honoring relinquishment as a wisdom path, consumer-based cultures see this transition with pity and sadness. In contrast, one of my mentors, Rev. John Cummins, is now in that final stage and embracing it with consciousness. He lives in one room in a nursing home now, which he refers to as “Thoreau’s cabin.” He receives visitors with grace and kindness, but his focus has clearly shifted away from the mundane things of this world.

The maps we consult affect how we see our journey. The four Hindu stages of life give me a sense of direction as I go on my way. I am grateful for all who have gone before me, whose lives I study for clues as to what lies ahead.



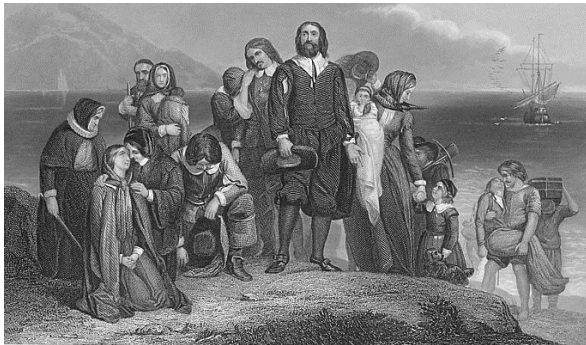
And I am wildly curious about how my own journey will continue to unfold. ■

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Have you ever really thought about why we call those early settlers who came to New England seeking religious freedom "Pilgrims"? Unlike Puritans, who made the journey a bit later, the Pilgrims don't get their name as a description of their religious beliefs.

The Puritans were religious folks who wanted a purer form of Christianity than they felt like they got from the Church of England. The same was true for the Pilgrims, for that matter, and each group sailed westward because they wanted to have their own separate church life in a way that the Church of England simply didn't allow.



But that first group of folks who landed on Cape Cod in 1620 didn't think of themselves as Pilgrims in the way that we think of ourselves as Unitarian Universalists, and other folks think of themselves as Methodists or Lutherans or Presbyterians. "Pilgrim" wasn't a name for a particular religious denomination that described their subset of Christianity.

No, they thought of themselves as pilgrims—with no capital letter—as in people who were on a pilgrimage.

So what's a pilgrim? A pilgrim is someone who goes on a journey for a religious reason. There are lots of famous places that people have visited on pilgrimages for thousands of years. Ancient Greeks went on



pilgrimage to Delphi to consult the Oracle, and to be in the place which was considered to be the center (the *omphalos*—literally,

the bellybutton) of the world. In the Middle Ages Christians walked hundreds of miles to visit Rome or Jerusalem or the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, among many other sites. Even today, it is one of the Five Pillars of Islam to make the *hajj*, a pilgrimage to Mecca, and every Muslim who is physically and financially able to do so is expected to make this holy journey.

But the Pilgrims weren't pilgrims going to a special holy site. They didn't even intend to end up in Cape Cod, where they built their settlement; they were aiming for Virginia, where English settlers had already moved in. But they saw their lives as *a whole* as a pilgrimage, and they

were absolutely committed to a religious journey that would take them to a place where they could lead lives they felt were holy.

It's kind of an amazing idea. It's a pretty big challenge to be a pilgrim to begin with—traveling, even walking, hundreds or thousands of miles to get

to a place that you believe will feed your spirit or deepen your religious life. But what if you saw your whole life as a pilgrimage toward your deepest faith and convictions, and nothing in the world would stop you from making that journey?

The Pilgrims, after all, made a heck of a journey. When they were not able to practice their religion freely in England, they set out for Holland, where there was more religious liberty. But not only was life in Holland difficult, but they also felt that their community was in danger of assimilating into Dutch culture and losing their distinct identity. So they decided to set out across the ocean. They didn't have the money to make

the trip, so they worked out a deal with investors that put them in debt for years to come. One of their boats, the *Speedwell*, turned out not to be seaworthy, so after two attempts that boat and all its passengers had to be left behind, splitting up families.

The journey across the ocean took more than two months, and storms prevented them from getting to their intended destination. Once they had landed, the weather turned out to be far harsher than they had anticipated, and they realized (perhaps not surprisingly) that they didn't know the first thing about growing food in this environment that was totally new to them. More than half of them died from malnutrition and disease, and the only way that any of the Pilgrims made it through was because of the help they received from the Wampanoag who already lived there.

It's hard to imagine that the Pilgrims would have ever set sail if they had known just how difficult the journey was going to be. But that's the way it is when you head out on a journey. You never do know. Sometimes a storm blows in, and your little camping trip turns into a dangerous wilderness adventure. Sometimes the people you count on to keep you safe on the journey turn out to be totally untrustworthy. Sometimes you think the trail will be clear and well-marked, but you end up lost. Things happen on journeys.

But if you are a Pilgrim, there is no way around the risk. If your heart and soul and spirit are set on a path, if you see your whole life as a journey toward faith or justice, then you just can't stay where you are and take what you're given. You can hope that the weather will be gentle, and the ship that you're sailing well-built. You can hope that the people you meet will be helpful and kind.

But you only find out what the journey will bring by setting out in the direction of the land of your dreams, and then just continuing to move on. With any luck, there will be times of Thanksgiving as you go. ■



Church of the Larger Fellowship
Unitarian Universalist

24 Farnsworth Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02210-1409 USA

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
BOSTON, MA
PERMIT NO. 55362

Did You Know

that the CLF sponsors a
blog page for UUs on the
religion and spirituality site
patheos.com? Check it out
at [www.patheos.com/
blogs/uucollective/](http://www.patheos.com/blogs/uucollective/)

Quest Editorial Team: Meg Riley; Janet Lane; Jordinn Nelson Long; Kat Liu; Beth Murray; Cindy Salloway; Jaco ten Hove; Arliss Ungar; Lynn Ungar, editor

Copyright 2015 Church of the Larger Fellowship. Generally, permission to reproduce items from *Quest* is granted, provided credit is given to the author and the CLF. **ISSN 1070-244X**

CLF Staff: Meg Riley, senior minister; Jody Malloy, executive director; Lynn Ungar, minister for lifespan learning and *Quest* editor; Jorge Espinel, Latino ministries; Danny Givens, prison chaplain; Lena K. Gardner, director of membership & development; Lori Stone Sirtosky, director of technology; Jazmine Steele, director of communication; Beth Murray, program administrator; Cindy Salloway, fiscal administrator; Hannah Eller-Isaacs, social media coordinator and administrative assistant; Andrea Fiore, webmaster; **Learning Fellows:** Kimberly Debus, aesthetics ministries; Mandy Goheen, prison ministries; Bob LaVallee, military, worship & congregational life ministries; Jordinn Nelson Long, pastoral care & congregational life ministries; Slim Moon, worship & podcasting ministries; Sarah Prickett, family ministries

Web Site www.clfuu.org — **E-mail** clf@clfuu.org — **Toll-Free Line** 800-231-3027 — **Jewelry** 617-948-6150
CLF Unitarian Universalist, 24 Farnsworth Street, Boston MA 02210-1409 USA — Telephone 617-948-6166



Trains

BY FLORENCE CAPLOW, MINISTER, TWO RIVERS UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST,
CARBONDALE, COLORADO

To ride the train is to let the whole world in. Old brick downtowns, Black Angus bulls, trucks idling at the crossroads, dawn on the high plains, pronghorns racing across the open range—whole worlds coming and going. And inside, a few hundred of us, an ephemeral drifting world, our-selves: Black and white, American and Europe-an, rich and poor, just this once and never again, traveling together, swaying as the train rides the tracks, entering each other's lives for these few hours before we disembark: this one in the dead of night in Dodge City, Kansas; that one in early morning light in Pueblo, Colorado; that one riding on to the City of Angels, waving goodbye as we shoulder our bags and walk down the plat-form toward whatever awaits us. ■

