

Being Yourself: The Spiritual Journey

Readings: I want to begin with seven readings from the literature of the journey.

From Izaak Walton:

Come out from under your four walls and roof. Declare a holiday. Take the road with me to Thatch House, that admirable hostelry where good companions gather, where at the end of the day you'll find a good telling of tales, a good singing of ballads, and linen sheets that look white and smell of lavender.

Stand with me at mid-day where the sun casts no shadow, and let us together consider all things concerning our art. I would have you know that tingling mood which comes to all who share the best that they have found. And let us share that humility, which is at once the boon and the true grace of all who learn together.

From Walt Whitman:

I tramp a perpetual journey, (come listen all!)
 My signs are a rain-proof coat, good shoes, and a staff cut from the woods
 No friend of mine takes...ease in my chair,
 I have no chair, no church, no philosophy,
 I lead no one to a dinner table, library, exchange,
 But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,
 My left hand hooking you round the waist,
 My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road.
 Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,
 You must travel it for yourself...
 Shoulder your duds, dear one, and I will mine, and let us hasten forth,
 Wonderful cities and free nations we shall fetch as we go.

From Mary Oliver:

Wild Geese
 You do not have to be good.
 You do not have to walk on your knees
 for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body
 love what it loves.
 Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
 Meanwhile the world goes on.
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of rain
 are moving across the landscapes,
 over the prairies and the deep trees,
 the mountains and the rivers.
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,

are heading home again.
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
 the world offers itself to your imagination,
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --
 over and over announcing your place
 in the family of things.

From Carl Sandburg:

And if you start to go to that country remember first you must sell everything you have, pigs, pastures, pepper pickers, pitchforks, put the spot cash money in a ragbag and go to the railroad station and ask the ticket agent for a long slick yellow slab ticket with a blue splanck across it. And you musn't be surprised if the ticket agent wipes the sleep from his eyes and asks, 'So far? So early? So soon?'

From Dante:

In the middle of the journey of our life
 I found myself astray in a dark wood
 where the straight road had been lost sight of.
 How hard it is to say what it was like
 in the thick of thickets, in a wood so dense and gnarled
 the very thought of it renews my panic.
 It is bitter almost as death itself is bitter...
 How I got into it I cannot clearly say
 for I was moving like a sleepwalker...

From Adrienne Rich:

"The rules break like a thermometer
 Quicksilver spills across the charted systems
 We're out in a country that has no language
 No laws. We're chasing the raven and the wren
 Through gorges unexplored since dawn.
 Whatever we do together is pure invention. The maps
 They gave us were out of date by years."

From Zen Buddhism:

"When I began studying Zen, mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers.

During Zen, mountains were no longer mountains, rivers were no longer rivers.

After Zen, mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers."

Sermon:

Sometimes when someone has to go address a group of people, or perform in some way, a supportive ally tells them, “Just go out there and be yourself.” Hundreds of people watching – just be yourself. Right. Easier said than done.

Along the same line, when I first met my wife, and we were walking to her car (I was hoping for her phone number.) she sneezed and had to blow her nose. She looked embarrassed, and I said, “Oh, let’s just be real.” She and I have been trying to live up to that for eight years now. Again, not easy.

It is hard to be yourself because as children people learn to be who their parents want them to be. As I see it, children figure out what from them their parents can handle, and present that image of themselves to their parents. When parents can’t handle a daughter’s anger and power, she adopts an accommodating persona. When parents deny a son’s sensitivity, he develops a stoic persona. As children present a palatable image of themselves, the parents love and keep their children; the children’s belonging is secure, their survival ensured. That’s the child’s contract with parents: I present what you can handle, and you keep me safe and ensure my survival.

But then I grow up, and the persona, the façade persists. Now presenting a palatable persona to the world does not let others know the real me, and leaves me lonely. Furthermore, I can be so invested in my surface that I do not know my own inner reality. Maintaining a divide between my façade and my real self causes anxiety. Finally having to relate to someone else’s façade grows boring. So be yourself. Be real.

But I love my persona. It helped me survive childhood. Like a raft that carried me across a raging river, I cling to it, even though I have a road before me and a cumbersome the raft holds me back. So let go of the persona, the raft, and walk the road of being yourself. So simple on paper.

When people want to be themselves, and relate authentically to others, spirituality offers a more complex prescription than, just be yourself: the spiritual journey. As you desire to be yourselves, you take this journey, out from the familiar, into the unknown, to die, and be reborn.

As you journey I wish for you the supportive companionship of each other. As Unitarian Universalists, we tend to value the journey, the quest. When we affirm the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, we support the spiritual journey. When we value the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we free people to journey.

The spiritual journey can take a lifetime; it can take a minute. As a newly minted minister, I took a spiritual journey one day at a ministers’ meeting. During a discussion of our meeting format, I sat quiet, afraid, really, of my colleagues. I wondered, what am I afraid of? I looked at the mostly men of the group and thought of my father. I had

admired my dad. He was funny; everyone liked him. He was the most important person in my life, so I wanted him to like me.

But once in a while as a kid, when I expressed a feeling he didn't like, he would crush it. If I was angry and tried to explain it, he'd say, "You're just rationalizing." I didn't know what rationalizing was, but if he didn't like it, I didn't want to do it. If I was sad, he'd say, "You're just feeling sorry for yourself." Afraid of being a bad son, and of him rejecting me, I presented a persona of emotional control and caution around my father.

At the ministers' meeting it occurred to me, I'm sitting in a room full of fathers, and I'm still afraid. What would I do if the fear did not stop me? Father figures all around me, what do I want to do? I felt then courage, and did something I'd never done at a ministers' meeting. I joined the discussion of our format by making a proposal. I made a motion. There. It was a spiritual journey.

The journey is universal. As Joseph Campbell says, "We do not have to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known." I want to describe the essential journey to give you a map of its landscape, so that you might feel encouraged on your way and might move through its labyrinth ultimately to be yourself and to wholeness and peace.

On the journey a hero, a man or woman, sets off for unknown regions, and there struggles, dies, encounters male or female divinities, is reborn with new wholeness, and returns to give life to the community. With different characters, embellishments, and emphases the story is told by Australian Aborigines, Buddhists, Christians, Unitarian Universalists, everyone.

The journey begins when the hero realizes something needs to be faced. I am not being myself. I am lonely. In Hamlet, a character observes, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." In another story, prince Siddhartha, who had been sheltered from all pain by his father, happens for the first time upon an old man. The next day he sees a diseased man, then a corpse, then a monk. These encounters unsettle him, and he realizes something needs to be faced: suffering, death, and the something-more to life. One night he slips away from the palace to begin his journey, in the course of which he becomes, the Buddha.

There is a fascination with this something-to-be-faced. Though fearsome, deep inside the hero it seems attractive, like a mountain that calls you to climb, at some risk to yourself, but that stands like the home of secrets, like a portal to power. Maybe on this mountain Yahweh will speak to you from a burning bush and tell you to remove your shoes because you stand on sacred ground, and then give you a glimpse of ultimate truth.

At this point the persona can stop the journey. It can see what's coming. It will die. It says, "Wait, we don't really need to climb that mountain. Accept the way things are. Climbing mountains won't change anything. Why even try?"

When the hero ignores his or her persona and embarks on the journey anyway, he or she is given aid from a protective figure. The helpful crone, a teacher, a friend -- such figures give the hero amulets, sayings, potions, hints, aids that reassure and promise success. Theseus is given a thread to spool out as he explores the labyrinth and then to follow back to its entrance. Perseus is given a mirror with which to look at Medusa.

Amulets in hand, the hero faces the threshold into the unknown. Guarding the threshold stand pairs of opposites: life and death, good and evil, beauty and ugliness. As a boy I faced the opposites of good son vs. bad son. I tried to be a good son and to live up to my father's ideas of whom I should be.

As the hero faces these paradoxes, the persona again reasons: "These cannot be passed. Choose one, and make it something others will like." But as long as I was choosing to be the good son, I was not crossing a threshold into the unknown of who I am.

Not holding to one opposite or the other, the hero journeys through them into the unknown. Walt Whitman journeys through stating, "I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also." Jason, seeking the Golden Fleece, faces two islands that smash into each other crushing boats: opposites. Setting aside the self-image's fearful reasoning, the hero sails through the clashing opposites and enters the unknown. In my case, I pushed through my good-son – bad-son opposites, in search of myself.

Having passed the threshold, the hero finds a strange landscape populated with ogres and dragons, violence and seduction. Odysseus encounters the violent Cyclops and seductive Sirens. In effect, one is struggling with the less laudable aspects of oneself, one's inner ogres, in the arduous development of self-awareness.

Despite even successful struggling, the hero does not conquer this unknown world, but is swallowed by it. Jonah is swallowed by the whale. Though Odysseus escapes the Cyclops and evades the Sirens, he remains swallowed, wandering through unknown seas, in the belly of the whale, for twenty years.

So swallowed, the hero appears to have died. With Persephone in the underworld, winter descends upon the earth. Jonah's shipmates give him up as lost. Suitors line up to marry Penelope. Jesus is crucified and buried. You or I on our journeys feel lost. "The rules break like a thermometer...we're out on a country that has no language, no laws." "Mountains are no longer mountains, rivers no longer rivers." There is death. The self-image dies. My self-image of the good son, cautious in front of my father, dies. For a time, maybe a moment, maybe a month, I do not know who I am. As Robert Frost says, "You become lost enough to find yourself."

When the good son in me has died, ministers, father figures surround me. In mythology these are gods who offer both life and danger. One father, Yahweh, permits

calamity and death to befall Job, and when Job confronts Yahweh about this, Yahweh answers, but not with an explanation. From a whirlwind this father declares, “Gird up thy loins now like a man;...Hast thou an arm like God? Canst thou thunder with a voice like God?...Where wast thou when I laid the foundation of the earth?”

Though Job’s God makes no attempt to vindicate himself, still Job is satisfied. He says, “now my eye sees thee; and therefore I...repent in dust and ashes.” Job’s repentance is not logical: he had done nothing wrong, but the self-image and its logic have died. When self-image-less, Job glimpses the entire span of the universe from God’s eye view, which satisfies his soul. God then rewards Job with a new house and family and one hundred forty more years of life.

On some journeys the hero confronts not a father but a mother, portrayed in myth as the Queen Goddess of the World. Like the father she too is ambivalent. She represents the promise of perfection and the threat of destruction.

A Hindu portrait of this Cosmic Mother gives her four arms, one with the “fear not” gesture, another bestowing gifts; another brandishing a bloody saber, and the fourth holding a severed head. To be successful the hero must contemplate both the benevolent and destructive sides of the Goddess with calm and compassion.

I meet the goddess in women from whom I want something and of whom I feel afraid. I see them as powerful. I want their gifts and fear their power. When I am calm and secure in their presence, that suggests I have done some journeying. When I am anxious, I am again a dependent child gazing upon my mother, which tells me there is something to be faced, and a new journey begins.

Facing these mother-Goddesses and father-Gods the successful hero faces his or her fears and hopes regarding his or her parents, and transcends them. The hero moves past childhood dramas, to become oneself. In other words, the spiritual journey involves the death of self-protective ideas of who one is, the persona, developed and relied upon in childhood, and the birth of, or initiation into, being oneself. In my case, I don’t have to be the cautious “good” son all my life. I can be myself.

As a corollary result of the journey, the hero moves past seeing the world as good or bad according to his or her wants. The hero finds that being alive transcends good and bad. Life becomes an ambiguous mystery, less to be judged, more to be lived. In my case at the ministers’ meeting, when my courage rallied and I made my motion, I did not expect my colleagues to accept it. In fact, they turned it right down, but that didn’t matter. I had expressed myself. I was beyond good and bad, acceptance and rejection. I had faced a fear and emerged alive, and so: good or bad, acceptance or rejection, were irrelevant. It was just me, alive.

So on the spiritual journey the hero goes into an unfamiliar realm, enters the underworld, battles, lets the self-image die, faces Goddess or God, and is reborn, and returns home with new power and a life-giving message. With my motion I may not

have bestowed a life-giving elixir upon my colleagues, but being myself I did give them more aliveness than I would have sitting quiet and afraid.

In mythology the hero's return from the journey restores the world. As one fairy tale ("Brier Rose") concludes: a prince, looking for a princess, enters a castle that has been under a spell and sleeping for one hundred years. Everyone is asleep, seemingly dead. Searching the castle he finds the princess also asleep. At last, there she is: the end of the journey. He marvels at her beauty, leans over, and kisses her. "She opens her eyes, awakes, and looks at him fondly. Together they come down the stairs, and the king wakes and the queen and the entire courtly estate, and all look at each other with big eyes. And the horses in the court stand up and shake themselves; the hunting dogs jump and wag their tails; the pigeons on the roof draw their heads out from under their wings, look around, and fly across the field; the flies on the wall walk again; the fire in the kitchen brightens, flickers, and cooks the dinner; the roast begins to sizzle; the cook gives the scullery boy a box in the ear that makes him yell; and the maid finishes plucking the chicken."

Jesus lives. Persephone emerges from the underworld, and the spring flowers bloom. Odysseus returns to Ithaca. The Buddha teaches a way to enlightenment. I offer a motion. The hero, having journeyed through his or her personal terror, surpasses fear.

Good and bad, life and death, divine and human, it is all one. The hero floats on a sea of Being, alive and aware.

Finally, though it is life giving, the hero's message upsets the status quo. So in time, the world takes the message, interprets it, analyses it, cools its ardor, and makes it safe. Jesus' message of love, though wonderful, is unsettling, so it is dulled in tomes of theology and law; which means there is something to be faced, and it's time for another hero to venture out of the village, carrying amulets and potions, through the clashing opposites, into the unknown to battle ogres and dragons, and be swallowed into the belly of the whale and die, and be given grace and mercy by the father God, and be embraced by the Goddess mother of the world, and become alive as oneself, to return and restore the world.

The Rev. Kenneth Reeves