

READING

Alexis de Tocqueville, an early observer of the United States, said this in his book *Democracy in America*, published in 1835:

In America I saw the freest and most enlightened people placed in the happiest circumstances that the world affords. Yet it seemed to me as if a cloud habitually hung upon their brows, and I thought them serious and almost sad, even in their pleasures. In the United States, people build houses in which to spend their old age, and they sell them before the roof is on; they plant gardens and sublet them just as the trees are coming into bearing; they bring fields into tillage and leave others to gather the crops; they embrace a profession and give it up; they settle in a place, which they soon afterwards leave to carry their changeable longings elsewhere.... They who have set their hearts exclusively upon the pursuit of worldly welfare are always in a hurry, for they have but a limited time at their disposal to reach, to grasp, and to enjoy it.

Derek Thompson, a staff writer for *The Atlantic*, in article titled “Workism is Making Americans Miserable,” writes:

On a deeper level, Americans have forgotten an old-fashioned goal of working: It’s about buying free time. The vast majority of workers are happier when they spend more hours with family, friends, and partners, according to research conducted by Ashley Whillans, an assistant professor at Harvard Business School. In one study, she concluded that the happiest young workers were those who said around the time of their college graduation that they preferred careers that gave them time away from the office to focus on their relationships and their hobbies.

How quaint that sounds. But it’s the same perspective that inspired the economist John Maynard Keynes to predict in 1930 that Americans would eventually have five-day weekends, rather than five-day weeks. It is the belief—the faith, even—that work is not life’s product, but its currency. What we choose to buy with it is the ultimate project of living.

(364 plus 102 words—516 words)

"Pilgrimage, Travel Guide, and Story"
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden
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at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

INTRODUCTION

The metaphors we use for life tend to involve travel—a path; a journey; a quest; a road you're on; you can have a peripatetic life—you can be nomadic; you can be itinerant. You can be a wanderer or a roamer or a migrant or an immigrant. Or merely unsettled. You can even be on a conveyor belt. You can walk on water; you can walk on thin ice. You can be walking in a mine field. You can be in a trackless forest or a trackless desert.

You can be *on* a path; you can stray *from* a path; you can be headed in the wrong direction; you can be lost; you can steer for the ditch. There can be false starts and wrong turns. You can follow maps or footprints or cairns. You can take the high road or the low road; you can take the road less travelled. You can strike out for your own territory; or you can follow Emerson's advice:

Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.

You can follow Led Zeppelin's advice: "there's still time to change the road you're on." But, "there's light at the end of the tunnel."

Why is it that that our lives get jammed into a journey or road metaphor? I suspect it results from the fact that our daily, ordinary lives are a real mess. Chaos, even. Faced as we are with each moment and every day asking "what next, sucker?" it's comforting to think that there are ditches on both sides of the road, so at least we know it when we've steered into a ditch. Because, in real life, *even that* is often not obvious.

After all, being on the wrong road or going the wrong direction at least implies that there *is* a right road and a right direction. And that's comforting. Because life so often looks like a . . . trackless desert.

For me, anyway, when I look back on my life, I'm simply amazed that *anything* worked, and that I'm here at all.

ONE

Pilgrimage. Journey.

The centuries-long struggle of African Americans to get an even break in the United States has been transformed into the metaphor of the Hebrew escape from Egypt and journey to the Promised Land.

That makes sense, even though it only took forty years of wandering for the Hebrew children. The African American five-hundred year, plus, struggle has actually been much worse!

The story of a journey makes all the chaos and confusion somehow more comprehensible.

Pilgrimage. The Puritan writer John Bunyan wrote a book he called *Pilgrim's Progress*, Published in 1678. Bunyan began his book this way: "As I walked through the wilderness of this world . . ."

In the early 1300's, the Italian poet Dante Alighieri started his trip to hell with these words:

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say
What was this forest savage, rough, and stern,
Which in the very thought renews the fear.

So bitter is it, death is little more . . .
Talk about a mid-life crisis! Dante, buddy, lighten up! You don't have to write a long, ponderous Medieval poem over it! Buy a Maserati!

Pilgrimage. It's a very old human impulse to go to sacred places.

When my wife Theresa and I were in Paris, we took a pilgrimage to the graves of Simone de Beauvoir and John Paul Sartre. Beauvoir was a pillar of feminist theory after the Second World War and instrumental in the thinking of several liberation movements. We had to go.

Lots of people make that pilgrimage—the tradition is to leave your Metro ticket stub on the graves. Their graves were covered in Metro stubs. The message was clear: people travel a long way to visit their graves because their example gives so many people direction.

Our theme for March is: "Journey: The practice of pilgrimage, courageous growth, and patient change"

Today I want to consider "the practice of pilgrimage."

TWO

Last week I considered "courageous growth," and I began by thinking about what "growth" as a person even means.

I talked about how the Protestant Reformation gave Western cultures the idea of individuality and authenticity.

I talked about early manifestations of Protestant self-expression in groups such as the Quakers, who in those days actually quaked, and the Ranters, the earliest European nudists on record.

"Authenticity."

Yes, Protestantism led to European state religions, such as Anglicanism and Lutheranism, but Protestantism also led to an explosion of denominational expressions that fractured into nearly endless varieties—something over two hundred

Protestant denominations at last count: the Shakers actually shook, the Methodists got their method on, and the Baptists took to baptizing.

Then those fringe groups moved to North America and in the vast American outback often became even more fringy.

But in his 1835 book *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville could already see another religion developing in North America:

They who have set their hearts exclusively upon the pursuit of worldly welfare are always in a hurry, for they have but a limited time at their disposal to reach, to grasp, and to enjoy it.

No, these weren't atheists trying to live in the here and now. They were Protestants who believed that frugality and hard work was next to godliness; somehow, they missed that they were joining Madonna in being "material girls" because every American somehow knows, as Madonna sang, "the boy with the cold hard cash is always Mister Right."

Tocqueville presciently saw that "reaching and grasping" would become the defining characteristic of the American psyche.

Our religion became the Religion of Progress, both in cultural and in personal terms. Self-help, self-improvement, onward and upward.

As Derek Thompson put it,

It is the belief—the faith, even—that work is not life's product, but its currency. What we choose to buy with it is the ultimate project of living.

Sure, all that reaching and grasping and workaholism was messy, but in some ways it worked for a couple of centuries. For a while, everything in the US looked shiny and new and possible.

But now, as the historian Jill Lepore points out in a recent book, the Religion of Progress has become the Religion of Innovation.

Here's the difference: "progress" implies a moral-ethical component—things are "getting better." John Bunyan didn't title his book *Pilgrim's Innovation*.

The concept of innovation has no such moral component. Innovation is only about disruption and changing things—good, bad, doesn't matter; it's only about "more."

If you will, "progress" is about throwing the spaghetti against the wall and waiting to see what sticks; "innovation" is only about throwing spaghetti against the wall, "damn the torpedos." It's all about doing something, anything.

Turns out that what the sociologist Max Weber saw as a positive and named the "Protestant Work Ethic" also has a very dark side. Take that attitude of reaching and grasping and greed, remove any remnants of a commitment to the larger social welfare, and you have . . . where we live today. An atomized society characterized by anomie—utterly ethically adrift—and plagued by individualism.

Oh, wait! I'm channeling the Pope— "thanks a lot, Protestantism."

A Reading from the Scottish poet Edwin Muir "The Way"

Friend, I have lost the way.
The way leads on.
Is there another way?
The way is one.
I must retrace the track.
It's lost and gone.
Back, I must travel back!
None goes there, none.
Then I'll make here my place,
(The road leads on),
Stand still and set my face,
(The road leaps on),
Stay here, for ever stay.
None stays here, none.
I cannot find the way.
The way leads on.
Oh places I have passed!
That journey's done.
And what will come at last?
The road leads on.

THREE

Just as I find it clarifying to figure out what a word has meant through time, I find it useful to trace the history of an idea. Why?

Because what at first often appears to be a solid grey wall, appears, upon closer inspection, to have lots of nooks and crannies and cracks and sometimes even big, gaping holes.

The concept of individuality, for instance, at first appears to be solid, obvious, and unquestionable. But after you realize that individuality wasn't even a concept in 1300, and by 1700 could mean quaking, shaking, ranting, and even nudism, and that the Chinese government is dead-set against Christianity in China exactly because they see it as teaching individualism, then the concept looks more approachable and malleable.

Then it's pretty clear that Yogi Berra's "the future ain't what it use to be" is a very Zen thing to say.

Last week I shared a bit of my life's "journey". I talked about my decision to vamoose off the farm and seek my fortune as a poet.

I for one at age eighteen was not prepared to think these things through in any serious way. About all I had was the messaging that hard work and getting by is about all you can expect from life. As one of my grandfathers used to say: "All we poor folk get out of life is what we manage to eat."

Anyway, the words "fortune" and "poet" are, unfortunately not often linked, and, when you're born poor, you're already in debt when you take your first breath.

My parents didn't have health insurance, of course, so when I was born, the hospital wouldn't release my mom and me until the bill got paid, so my dad had to drive down to my grandfather's farm to borrow the money to get my mom and me out of the hospital.

Farmers never have cash, so my grandfather had to sell a fatted calf to get the money. So, I can say that when I was born, they killed the fatted calf, though not for the usual reason. (You see, it's a lot easier to be biblical when you live on a farm.)

Still, I was born under considerably better economic conditions than my father was. When my father was born, prematurely, the country doctor came out to the house and my other grandfather promised him a chicken for the delivery. Well, they didn't actually *have* a chicken at the time, and they didn't have any prospects of acquiring one, so the doctor in that case never got paid.

With my own kids, again, I didn't have any insurance. And I didn't have any money. But I had a credit card!

When you're born poor, you're in debt before you take a breath. Which makes life's journey kinda twisty and turn-y.

As I mentioned last week, I wanted to go to college, but nobody in the family had been to college. There was a vague rumor about a distant cousin who had gone to college, and not long after he arrived, he'd drunk himself to death.

This was a sort of "don't get above your raisin'" cautionary tale. It was presumptuous to think about such things. Another of my grandfather's sayings: "You cain't put a fifty-dollar hat on a five-dollar head."

All of us carry multiple and often conflicting stories around with us, and these affect the decisions we make that create the lives we live.

"You've got to do this." "You'll never be good enough." "You don't deserve to have fun." "You should." "You shouldn't." "You can't." "You won't."

"You'll never."

There must be some pattern, mustn't there?

The contemporary German philosopher Peter Sloterkijk calls this sort of thinking "fate kitsch." You know "kitsch"—cheap little tchotchkes. *Cosas baratas*. "Fate kitsch" is when you're letting all the cultural trash that surrounds you make your life-decisions for you.

"It's too late."

"It's too early."

"You're too skinny."

"You're too fat."

"You're too young."

"You're too old."

"You're too poor."

"Wait! Have patience!"

And soon our lives—our fate—is being ruled by these cheap trinkets. But here's the thing: yes, life is a linear process. But the metaphors we rely on to define our lives, what we can do in our lives, and the directions we feel impelled to follow are all . . . metaphors.

And there's still time to change the metaphor you're on!

CONCLUSION

Narrative Therapy is a contemporary psychological technique aimed at helping people rewrite those stories. Those cultural and family messages that turn into self-limiting and self-defeating narratives.

We can rewrite the stories we tell ourselves, and by so doing, we are capable of changing the road we're on.

Seriously: everyone here can tell a story from the point of view of poor, poor, pitiful me. And everyone of us can tell a story of overcoming and victory. Why? Because, uh, check yourself—we're all alive here this morning, which is a miraculous thing to be!

That's why I put those words in your order of service this morning from the Polish poem Czeslaw Milosz:

The purpose of poetry is to remind us
how difficult it is to remain just one person.

Yes. That's the real narrative, the true story: darn, it's difficult to get up in the morning and be who you were yesterday.

Remember I mentioned my pilgrimage to the grave of John Paul Sartre earlier? Sartre wrote: "Napoleon was merely the first person to think he was Napoleon."

And let's phone in to the Pope again: Jesus Christ was only the first person to consider himself Jesus Christ.

You can run down the list of famous people. But . . . you're the first person to think you are you.

We ministers here at First Unitarian Society, we've done a lot of memorials. "The first this," "an early that." "The biggest." "The most." It goes on. So many times I've heard people say after a memorial here, "Damn! I wished I'd only known about all when they were alive!"

But here's the thing: all of you are the children of those mad Protestants long ago.
Here's as simple and as complex and as compound as it gets: You be you.

You be you.

My truth is very simple: I don't know how in the hell I got here.

I don't know how in the hell this place got here.

But . . . here we are.

What an amazing road we're on!

"The road leads on."

SOURCES

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