

## Into the Wilderness

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This is my story of how I deepened my relationship with Unitarian Universalism by learning to love our Christian roots.

And, before I begin, I will say:

Everyone has their own journey of faith

And they are all valid, real stories.

I love yours, and yours, and yours.

And today I share mine with you,

Not because I want it to become yours

But because our stories and our journeys shape us.

And so, I know that in this story, you may not see your own reflected,

But that's because this is my personal story,

And I'm only living one person's life.

And one of the things I love most about my job,

Is that I get to hear you stories, too.

I hope you will share your story with me.

This is my story:

In my first semester in college,

I remember complaining to my mom, on the phone

“Moo-oom, everyone here is the same *age* as me! It's so *boring!*”

I had been transplanted to Boston, and I had come from being immersed in my childhood church

Where I was the only youth my age

But that was okay for me—I had age peers at school

And at church I staffed the nursery, and I babysat for those same kids

Whose moms were all close friends of my mom

Women who were mentors to me, who trusted me with their children,

Whose kids I mentored.

I had real relationships with people who were in different life stages from me

And even at the time, I knew it was something special.

Growing up in that same Unitarian Universalist church

I also got the message that there were some things you just don't talk about in church.

God, for instance.

And the Bible.

Sex and politics were just fine, of course.

I'm curious, how many people here were raised UU?

And how many people were raised in another Christian or Catholic faith?

And how many were raised Jewish or Muslim or another faith?

And how many were raised non-practicing, or without any religious affiliation?

Okay, so we roughly resemble UU national averages  
Because some studies have shown that only about 10% of adults currently attending  
Unitarian Universalist churches were raised in our faith.  
And what that meant, at the time I was growing up  
and in the specific church that I grew up in  
Was that many of the adults that were in the church I grew up in  
had left another religious traditions for some reason or another  
And that those reasons often carried hurts with them  
Hurts that they did not want to be reminded of.

And before I go on to tell you about my own spiritual journey around this,  
I want to make two disclaimers.  
The first is that Unitarian Universalist culture  
has shifted significantly in our ability to use language of faith,  
around God and the Holy, since my own formative years in church.  
And the second is that this congregation,  
UUAC Sherborn, and I would not say this if I did not mean it:  
This congregation has an ability to be hospitable  
to a diversity of theological expressions  
in a way that is truly mature and unique.  
I see you, all the time, trying your hardest to be open to—  
and to really let it into your hearts—  
the idea that music and language that does not speak to you personally  
is deeply moving to another person in this sanctuary.  
It is one of the many, many reasons that I love this congregation,  
and I think it is a really great gift that this congregation  
as a whole has and that you offer to one another.

So with those two disclaimers,  
I grew up in my childhood church with a great love for community  
And the clear and strong message that we did *not* believe in the Bible  
And specifically, that we were better, smarter, more evolved  
than people who took the Bible literally.  
And I got that message  
because many of the adults in my community had been really, deeply hurt  
By people who used this book as a weapon.

And the effect of some of these messages  
Was that I felt alienated from the spiritual roots of my own religion.  
That I didn't know how to pray  
I didn't have any particularly meaningful religious rituals  
or practices in my life on a regular basis.  
That my own language of faith was stunted  
Because words about prayer and God and faith and ritual and belief  
Felt awkward and clumsy in my unpracticed mouth.

And I loved Unitarian Universalism,

And I knew it has deep and beautiful and meaningful theology and roots  
But I didn't feel like I could *really* access what those were without knowing the language or  
long view of tradition or rituals.

And so, to solve this particular problem,  
When I decided that I wanted to become a UU minister,  
I chose to go to a historically Christian theological school.  
And I went to a Christian seminary  
because I needed to more deeply know the spiritual roots  
of the religious tradition that I have called my home my whole life.  
I went to a Christian seminary because I wanted to know  
the rhythms and liturgy and rituals and practices that my spiritual ancestors,  
the first Unitarians and Universalists,  
had been in conversation with.  
I wanted to better know the stories that Unitarians and Universalists—  
which both came out of Christian denominations—  
had used as the very foundation of this faith.  
I went to a Christian seminary  
because I longed to know deep in my bones that I was part of a story  
that was older than me, was older than anyone I've ever met,  
because I find it deeply comforting to know  
that I do not have to figure it all out by myself,  
And that other people have been searching for answers  
to the same big questions I have for millennia,  
That I am part of something that is so much bigger than my own life  
or my own lifetime,  
This search for meaning that we humans take part in.

And so, I looked to my religion's roots, to understand how to make sense of my own life,  
and look toward the future.  
To remember that this all was here long before me,  
and this all will be here after me.

So, this brings me to why I love the season of Lent.

Growing up, I always understood Lent as the time when my Catholic best friends  
Wouldn't eat meat on Fridays.  
Or that sometimes it would involve the infamous "giving things up".  
Which didn't sound like very much fun to me, as a kid.  
It sounded punishing, grounded in the idea that we humans are inherently sinful  
And it still can sound that way,  
if Lenten practices are based in the idea  
that we must transcend our quote-unquote "sinful" earthly bodies  
To be made holy.  
And so it wasn't until I was in seminary  
The Christian seminary I went to,  
That I began to seriously engage in trying to understand what wisdom Lent could hold for  
me, as a Unitarian Universalist.

Lent is the time of preparation for the great feast of Easter  
The six weeks between Ash Wednesday, which was this past Wednesday,  
And Easter.  
It remembers the time between when Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan  
By John the Baptist  
And when he began his public ministry,  
Knowing that he would be met with both belief and betrayal  
And knowing that he needed a holy clarity about his purpose  
In order to be able to see it through.

And the reason that I find such deep meaning in Lent,  
And especially am finding it this year,  
Is that Lent remembers those forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness,  
Before the joy of Easter.

Because before deep joy  
The promise of hope and resurrection of Easter  
Comes a time in the wilderness  
A time of feeling lost, alone, frightened  
A time of wrestling with demons, inside you or around you,  
A time of struggle,  
A time of wondering “how did I get here?” and “What am I doing here?”

Jan Richardson, who wrote the blessing that was our reading today, writes,

*“What are you doing here?”*

That’s the question that the desert gives us, isn’t it? What are we doing here? Not just: what are you doing here in this physical place, but also: what are you doing here in this life?

Sometimes it takes going into the wilderness, of body or of soul, to find the answer to this question. Traveling toward where the familiar contours of our lives disappear. Leaving the landmarks behind, the people and patterns and possessions that orient us.

That’s where Jesus goes. Surfacing from the waters of his baptism, he doesn’t fling himself into his ministry, doesn’t take up his work among the community that will meet him with both belief and betrayal. He first goes into the place where everything is stripped away, and he confronts the basic questions about who he is and what he is doing.

So what are you doing here? At the outset of the Lenten journey, why are you where you are? What do you need from the Forty Day Place that this season offers? Is there a wilderness you need to enter—with your body or with your soul or with both—in order to gain clarity at this point in your life? What might that look like? Whose stories could you draw on, lean on, take heart from, as you contemplate this?

Removing ourselves from at least some of our usual routines, for moments or for months, can shift the way that we view our life. It doesn't often require taking ourselves to a literal wilderness in the manner that Jesus did. But his sojourn there reminds us there is wisdom in knowing when to turn toward a place, a person, or a practice that can help us see what we cannot always see under our own power.

This wisdom lies at the heart of Lent. These days challenge us to take on a practice, or give one up, so that we can look at our lives in a different way. As Jesus knew, going into the barren and uncomfortable places isn't about proving how holy we are, or how tough, or how brave. It's about letting God draw us into the place where we don't know everything, don't *have* to know everything, indeed may be emptied of nearly everything we think we know. And thereby we become free to receive the word, the wisdom, the clarity about who we are and what God is calling us to do."

Wilderness times can deepen clarity—when it strips away  
that which does not matter  
and gets down to the bare essentials.  
And wilderness times are not easy journeys,  
but in them we can often find meaning and focus.  
There is often the wilderness of times we did not seek: of personal struggle, of divorce, of  
death, or loss;  
of depression and addiction and national tragedies and violence.  
And as I try to make sense of my Dad's death, just four weeks ago,  
I find myself in a wilderness time, myself.  
Disoriented to the life I knew, surrounded by unfamiliar landscapes, trying to make meaning.  
And for others there is the wilderness of things we did seek:  
new parenthood, sometimes divorce,  
new paths and things we discerned and chose,  
things that are still disorienting, that still push us to really discern: "what am I doing here?"  
I think that is what the practice of giving something up or taking on a practice for Lent is  
trying to do—  
to strip away things that get in the way of our clarity  
To help us make good use of the wilderness  
To gain clarity on what really matters to us most  
And to promise that after the wilderness comes hope.  
Not optimism, but hope.  
It helps us to say "not this, not this, not this", so we can say "yes, this"  
"this is what really matters".  
And with this framing of going into the wilderness  
Of doing the hard, sometimes heartbreaking, spiritual work that it requires  
To strip away those things that cause us to miss the mark.

Let me read you the blessing once again, our reading today,  
Thinking about whatever wilderness or struggle you might be facing in your life.

If you would enter  
into the wilderness,

do not begin  
without a blessing.

Do not leave  
without hearing  
who you are:  
Beloved,  
named by the One  
who has traveled this path  
before you.

Do not go  
without letting it echo  
in your ears,  
and if you find  
it is hard  
to let it into your heart,  
do not despair.  
That is what  
this journey is for.

I cannot promise  
this blessing will free you  
from danger,  
from fear,  
from hunger  
or thirst,  
from the scorching  
of sun  
or the fall  
of the night.

But I can tell you  
that on this path  
there will be help.

I can tell you  
that on this way  
there will be rest.

I can tell you  
that you will know  
the strange graces  
that come to our aid  
only on a road  
such as this,  
that fly to meet us

bearing comfort  
and strength,  
that come alongside us  
for no other cause  
than to lean themselves  
toward our ear  
and with their  
curious insistence  
whisper our name:

*Beloved.*

*Beloved.*

*Beloved.*

Beloved, we all have our own wilderness journeys to go on.  
But do not go on into the wilderness without first hearing this:  
You are beloved.  
You will have help on your journey.  
It will not be easy,  
You will not be free from danger or fear.  
But strange graces will come to you  
That can only come on a road such as this.  
And you were named Beloved by one who has traveled this path before:  
May you use this time to find what really matters.

And so, my beloved people,  
I tell you all of this because I look to people who have traveled this path before  
Not only this path of grief and loss,  
But the path of life—all of the things that I have had to discern  
Or choose  
Or figure out  
From those pieces of practical discernment- housing, jobs, relationships- to those spiritual  
questions- meaning, call, purpose-  
I have found that I need help  
From those who have walked this path before.  
And so, I look to the ancestors—the spiritual ancestors who have asked the same hard  
questions  
And I find myself coming back to Lent, to church, to this multigenerational community,  
Because I find that I need to learn from and pass on our traditions through the generations  
Traditions for celebrating, for discerning, for grieving, for remembering,  
For answering those ultimate questions  
And I cannot do it by myself.  
Because I need to remind myself that I am part of a story  
That was here long, long before I got here  
And will be here long, long after I am gone.  
Remember that you are stardust, and to stardust you shall return.  
But in between,

We seek to build meaningful lives  
And we pass the stories along.  
Generation to generation.

Thank you, beloved, for being a part of this story with me.  
Amen.