

The Way It Is
~ William Stafford ~

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

A couple years ago, Emily, my beloved spouse and co-minister, was navigating an unfamiliar neighborhood. She had just come from the eye doctor, and the routine appointment had stretched longer than planned in what was a tightly packed schedule for the day. Her mind was jumbled everything on her to-do list and she was paying more attention to the clock on the dashboard than to her surroundings. Instead of turning left, she turned right, and drove directly into the cemetery.

And so the thought popped into her head: one wrong turn and you end up in the graveyard. She laughed to herself – it immediately sounded ridiculous.

Ridiculous, but honest. Doesn't life just feel like that sometimes? If we make one mistake, we're doomed! Sometimes it can seem like one wrong turn can ruin everything.

But that afternoon, instead of taking the first roundabout as a chance to turn around and immediately correct her mistake, she kept driving, going further into the cemetery.

The afternoon sun was bright and warm, the air breezy and fresh. The sloped land was speckled with headstones and trees. It was a different world than the busy intersection two blocks away. She slowed the car down, and parked in the shade of an oak tree.

She took a few deep breaths. Maybe she had not taken a wrong turn after all. Maybe this was exactly where she was supposed to be in the midst of that over scheduled day.

What if on life's journey, on the spiritual path, there are no wrong turns?

There's an app you can download for your smartphone called GPS for the Soul. It's a nice app, it has lovely little meditations with calming, peaceful music and pretty pictures of trees and mountains and stuff like that. I even occasionally make the wise choice and use it to center myself instead of reading another news story or checking for the next email. But the truth is—as nice as that app is—there is no GPS for the soul.

There is no map to the vast reaches of our inner lives. The territory of the soul cannot be navigated by turn-by-turn directions.

Sometimes this truth is a breath of fresh air in a busy day. It's the truth that brought Emily a moment's rest in the beauty of the world instead of frantically trying to find her way out of the cemetery. In Unitarian Universalism it is this truth that we hold onto to guard against dogma—the rigid maps of religious traditions that proclaim that there is one way and only one way.

But sometimes, we find ourselves like Anna in the blizzard. Desperate for a map, a guide, a rope, a thread to follow. Have you been there? Do you know that place, lost and longing? In times like these our find-your-own-way faith can feel weak and feeble. In times like these the truth that there is no GPS for your life's journey can be disappointing if not devastating.

In the introduction to his book *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer—the great Quaker teacher and spiritual guide—talks about the rope that farmers used in the great plains to keep from getting lost in the blizzard. He writes that, “Today we live in a blizzard of another sort. It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome, war. It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others. We all know stories of people who have wandered off into this madness and been separated from their own souls, losing their moral bearings and even their mortal lives...Some of us fear that we, or those we love, will become lost in the storm. Some are lost at this moment and are trying to find the way home. Some are lost without knowing it...”

We live in anxious and uncertain times. Some days it seems as if the whole world is on the brink of disaster. Headlines, like the school shooting in Florida this week, headlines tallying the most recent casualties of the opioid crisis, headlines about the cost of living about

housing and homelessness about the threat of nuclear war with North Korea, all without mentioning the latest clown to take center stage in this unfolding tragedy—we are daily assaulted with these headlines of anxiety and despair. Even when we are grounded in ourselves and connected to those we love, we can find ourselves struggling to make our way through the blizzard of the world.

In my first few months at University, seventeen years old and three thousand miles from home, I was as lost in the blizzard as I have ever been. My personal sorrows and my pain over the state of the world had collided to land me in a deep and lasting depression. After spending a week receiving care in an inpatient mental health unit, I returned home, lost and defeated. For weeks that became months, I struggled even to spend moments alone or to leave the house.

I will never forget the first Sunday that I came back to the Unitarian Universalist church of my childhood. I was bursting with tears throughout whole service, and as I wept with the sorrow of all the world's woes, I was gently and warmly enfolded into the loving embrace of my community.

What saved me, what healed me, what made me whole, was not psychiatrists, or the time at the hospital, or pharmaceuticals, or therapists, or exercise—though they were all helpful. What saved me was a religious community, a religious tradition, that told me to seek

support anywhere I could find it, to open to Buddhist teachings and practices of mindfulness as well as to the wisdom in the scientific traditions of psychology and psychiatry. What saved me was a religious community that told me with so much more than words: “You are loved. At the root of it all, there is a love holding you. A love holding all. No matter what you do, or what you say, or what you think, or what you feel, you are loved.”

When I couldn't hold the thread for myself, my community held it for me. When I had given up on my own inner guide, what Parker Palmer would name as the “Soul's Order,” my religious tradition tied a rope to the barn so I could find my way home. Palmer writes again, “my own experience of the blizzard, which includes getting lost in it more often than I like to admit, tells me that...The soul's order can never be destroyed. It may be obscured by the whiteout. We may forget, or deny, that its guidance is close at hand. And yet we are still in the soul's backyard, with chance after chance to regain our bearings.”

Have you ever walked a labyrinth? Not the kind with all the confusing turns and wrong choices and deadly minotaur hunting you, but the kind laid into the marble floor of Chartres Cathedral. I have never been to Chartres, but I've walked reproductions of that labyrinth many times. There are no wrong turns walking the labyrinth. The only choice is to take the next step. Walking the labyrinth, the only place to go is in, deeper and deeper towards the center. In the labyrinth, even when it

feels as though you are moving away from the center, you are still moving in. It is the only way to go.

The church that welcomed me with open arms knew the truth that I couldn't hold for myself. The congregation saw me through the turns of this winding labyrinth, even as I was certain I had taken a wrong turn.

Ours is not a dogma that becomes irrelevant, not a guidebook or a set of directions or a map out of the maze. It is a thread to hold along the labyrinth. Its guarantee is not that it will lead you anywhere in particular, but that you will be held along the way, that you are not traveling alone, that others have walked this path before you, and others will follow; that there is a center and wholeness to this journey even if it is hidden from view.

Unitarian Universalism - we are a people following the thread. We are a tradition - a living tradition - following the thread. Yes, you have to explain this to others, and it is hard for them to see. And while you hold onto this tradition - this thread - you are not alone. Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die; and we all suffer and we all get old. And here, holding onto this thread together, we navigate the blizzard. We do all of this in community.

Of course, it is difficult to explain in a casual conversation. We UUs talk about "elevator speeches" often. It is certainly hard to explain

about the thread in an elevator. Or in any other place and time where you don't have 20 uninterrupted minutes to preach your sermon.

One time Emily was having a conversation with a health care provider, a nurse. In the casual conversation, she asked Emily about her profession, and upon hearing she was a minister, asked about her faith, wanted to know more about Unitarian Universalism, where does it come from, what does the name mean. So Emily rattled off a standard 30 second speech. “Unitarian, which means I believe in one source, that we are all connected.” And knowing she was talking to someone who uses God language, she said, “Universalist, which means I believe in a loving God that would not and cannot damn anyone to hell.”

“Well,” the nurse responded after a moment's pause, “I'm a Christian, which means I believe in a loving God too, but He has standards.”

You can just imagine Emily's jaw dropping, she said she was speechless.

Later, after some reflection—and crowdsourcing a response from Facebook friends (many of whom are Unitarian ministers)—Emily had the response that hadn't come in the moment, she wished she could have said: “Well, in our tradition **we** have standards for **God**.”

We have standards for a God or for any ultimate truth. So many of us are drawn to this faith because of a powerful no. We say no to a patriarchal God, no to a fairytale God. No to a God with a magic wand or an all-seeing GPS for our lives. No to dogmatic religion. No to religious shame or guilt for not believing a particular way. And underneath these no's courses a stream of deeper yesses. There is a thread we follow.

Contemporary UU theologian Rebecca Parker articulates four strands that form the core of our theological thread. She draws four boundaries, four places where UU theology says no in order to say a deeper yes.

First, Parker says, “you can hold a view that there is no God or that God exists. But you cannot hold the view that God is the all-powerful determiner of everything that happens, such that there is no exercise of human freedom. UUism is clear that there is some measure of freedom accessible to every living being, given in the nature of things.”

Our thread is freedom.

Second, “You can define salvation, healing and wholeness in many ways. But you cannot hold to the view that there will be an ultimate separation of the saved from the damned by which the good are rewarded with eternal bliss and the damned are punished with eternal suffering. UUism is clear that all souls are of worth.”

Our thread is salvation, healing and wholeness, that is universal, for everyone.

Third, “You can be devoted to a specific religious practice—such as Christian prayer or Buddhist meditation or pagan ritual—but you cannot hold the view that there is one religion that encompasses the exclusive, final truth for all times and places. Not even Unitarian Universalism. We are confident that revelation is not sealed.

Our thread is openness, our thread is continuing to learn and grow.

And finally, Parker writes, “You can see this world as tragically flawed, wondrously gifted, or both. But you cannot hold the view that salvation is to be found solely beyond this world—in some life after death or a world other than this world...Our UU faith is clear that the ultimate is present here and now.”

Our thread is this world, our thread is this life, our thread is here and now.

We call this thread the theology of connection. And in the face of all our inner blizzards, all that pulls each of us apart and threatens the wholeness of our souls, connection is the thread we follow. If your beliefs lead you to be more connected to your deepest self, to others in

your family, your workplace, your church, to the great earth community to which we all belong, then they are in. If they lead you to be disconnected, to treat others poorly, or question your own value, then those beliefs are out. No to all that separates us. Yes to connection. Our thread is as simple as that.

The world is in a troubled state. The blizzard of despair and injustice and environmental catastrophe is real. And so too is the thread.

Hold onto the thread, not just for your own life, but the for the world. Not just for your own life, but for this life-giving, life saving religious tradition.

Addressing the challenges we face together on this planet will require the wisdom of our faith. There is no one way, but there is a way.

The way is freedom, and healing and wholeness that includes everyone. The way is always staying open to new learning, new truth, and the way is to remember that what matters most is this life, this world, this here and now.

Don't ever let go of the thread. May it be so, and Amen.