

## **“To be a Pilgrim” Address given by Sheena Gabriel - 13<sup>th</sup> September 2009**

My husband Rob, after his first few visits to Meadow chapel several years ago, jokingly nicknamed us ‘The Church of the Holy Journey’. Now I’m not sure how fair a description that is, but he must have picked up that as Unitarians we use the metaphor of journeys a lot, to describe the spiritual quest; and having recently been at the Unitarian Summer-school at Great Hucklow, which explored this very theme, I’d like to offer a few thoughts, trying to tease out what we may mean by the term ‘journey’, when applied to our Unitarian faith.

Stories about journeys abound in all religions. Judaism tells the story of Abraham setting out for a new land, from which the Jewish nation was born and Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt through the wilderness, towards the ‘Promised Land’. Christians recall the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem and the wise men travelling from the East to witness the birth of Jesus. Muslims recount the ‘Night Journey’ of the prophet Muhammad, describing how he was taken up to the Heavens and shown many wondrous sights; and in Buddhism the young prince Siddhartha, leaves the comfort of the palace, wandering as a beggar in search of truth. There are countless stories of missionaries and saints from many faith traditions travelling to distant lands and people have made long pilgrimages to sacred sites for thousands of years. Myths from all cultures make use of the motif, highlighting parallels between outer journeys and the inner journey of ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’. Joseph Campbell, the famous mythologist, in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* has captured the imagination of popular culture and the journey metaphor is now abundant in literature, film and psychology.

But what about a Unitarian perspective on the spiritual journey – how does it differ from that of other faith traditions? In the reading we heard earlier, from Sam Keen’s book *Hymns to an Unknown God*, he outlined the distinction – albeit simplified - between the one-pointed goal of religious pilgrimage and a more open-ended spiritual exploration; most Unitarians would resonate more with the latter. Many faith traditions have a fixed and final destination – usually a world beyond this one. I grew up with the idea that the journey through this life was a preparation for the next and that however hard the struggles, if I kept to the right path I would be rewarded with heaven. But as Unitarians we do not identify with the idea of a fixed and final goal to which we all aspire towards. Whilst some Unitarians hold beliefs about life after death – others do not. Generally we place more emphasis on this life - so our journey is less about a destination some place *elsewhere* and more about the way we travel here on earth.

Another difference - most religions use 'maps' that have remained unchanged for centuries – for example the Nicene Creed dating from nearly 1700 years ago and recited regularly by many church-goers. Now there's nothing wrong with creeds and scriptures being viewed as sources of ancient wisdom that provide guidance – but trouble comes when they're used as infallible documents. On a car journey we wouldn't find it helpful to use a road map from 50 years ago before motorways were built – we may reach our destination - eventually – but how much slower and more confusing the journey! Landmarks change, roads close and new routes are created. To say I am not good at map reading is an under-statement and if I'm to find my way to an unfamiliar destination, it's crucial I have the most up-to-date map available (I haven't yet got 'Sat-Nav'!) Again, if we are travelling in a foreign country, signs and directions need to be accurately interpreted and translated if they are to be of use.

Yet Scriptures and creeds are too often treated like road maps and signs to be taken literally, rather than texts that require deciphering and interpretation if they are to be relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Religious fundamentalists take no account of the changing landscape of society or differing cultures and that gives rise to distorted views that create divisions and wars. Unitarians don't follow a single 'map' - we recognise the wisdom in many faith traditions and also seek to expand, update and translate this knowledge through science, psychology, literature and our own life experience. We recognise new paths and landmarks, seeking to create inclusive maps that do not prescribe a single route to a single destination.

Pilgrims through the ages have travelled together in company – we think of the millions wending their way to Jerusalem, Mecca and Benares. In Geoffrey Chaucer's great work *The Canterbury Tales* we glimpse the camaraderie of pilgrims travelling together, very different characters with varied stories, but travelling to the same destination. Not only does a shared pilgrimage offer companionship, there is also safety in numbers; ask any explorer – those who set out alone, risk more dangers on the way. But this is where it gets complicated. How can we travel together in community as Unitarians, when we may be consulting different guidebooks, when we may even be on different paths? Some of us resonate with the Christian path, some are drawn to the wisdom of other faith traditions - and for others, guidance is derived from human sources. This is where the analogy of Unitarians travelling together towards a shared destination, fails.

Maybe instead of pilgrims on a single path, it is more accurate to liken us to a company of explorers – on a journey of discovery, without a fixed goal, but open to whatever we find along the way. But whilst we set out on individual paths, we recognise the need for others as we travel. So periodically we return to base camp, to share stories of what we have found and to compare notes as to where the ‘treasure’ may lie. We seek shelter together through the darkness of night. We look out for each other, as our paths cross and intersect. We listen to, and are guided by each other - we may even travel some of the way together – but we recognise that ultimately each person walks his or her own path and rather than searching for one ultimate Truth, all we can lay claim to, is what we each have found to be true for us *individually*.

This can seem less certain than walking a common path, but for some of us, it is the only way that feels authentic. Leaving the church of my youth and setting out on a spiritual path I could call my own, was something I needed to do if I was to be true to myself – but it was also very lonely. So what a joy it was to discover Meadow chapel – this community; to bump into fellow pilgrims, many of whom have also left the safety of known paths and set out in search of new terrain. And you - fellow travellers - whilst willing to share insights and provide guidance which may help me on my journey, have never tried to dictate which path I should take - and for that I am thankful; and neither will I try to dictate which path you should be walking.

Now it could be argued that without a single goal, without heaven or salvation in mind - that our spiritual search is an aimless wandering and that without a clear map to guide us we risk getting hopelessly lost. But to say we have no goals or no unifying map would be wrong. Whilst not having a creed, Unitarians seek to journey through life based on shared values of love, kindness, peace, tolerance, justice and respect for all people and the earth. You could say we seek to align ourselves to an ‘inner compass’ based on these values and can hopefully recognise when we have strayed off the right path or taken a wrong turn, by listening to the voice of our conscience. Don Juan in his teachings to Carlos Castaneda puts it this way:

*“Look at every path closely and deliberately...Then ask... yourself alone one question... does this path have a heart? If it does - that path is good. If it doesn’t, it is of no use.”*

So a journey of open-ended exploration, guided by an inner compass, where our individual paths cross and intersect, seems an apt metaphor for the Unitarian

journey. But it's important to not get too hooked on the idea of movement and progress. There is another spiritual teaching, which invites us to stop trying to get anywhere at all and to simply stand still. Rev Sarah Tinker, in her Summer school talks, reminded us that when in life we're not sure where we should be, or what we should be doing – we should simply look down at our feet – that where we are *in that moment* is the right place to be; to let go of the constant restless search, which often results in us missing what's already under our noses.

So here's a paradox: on the one hand is the metaphor of the journey, which involves an active search for meaning and truth, in which we are called to travel to new landscapes in search of the 'Pearl of Great Price' or 'Holy Grail'; On the other hand is the teaching that we need not move an inch, that there is nothing to search for - that we already possess everything we need. Lao Tzu, 2,500 years ago, wrote that: "*Without going out of your room you can understand the world. Without peering out of the window you can discern the way of heaven*". This concept of 'not doing', whilst most commonly associated with Taoism and Buddhism, is a thread that runs through many religions. Rumi, the 13<sup>th</sup> c. Sufi mystic asks: "*Pilgrims why are you turning in circles, what are you looking for... what a pity you have not discovered the Mecca that's inside?*" And Jesus is recorded as saying "*The kingdom of God is within you*" – not in some future, yet to be attained place – but *here and now*. All we need to do is stop and recognise it, like Moses turning aside and seeing the bush ablaze with light, right where he stood.

So how do we fit together these two seemingly opposing ideas? In my own experience I have found both concepts valid. As a child I grew up on bible stories and books like *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which gave me a hunger for the spiritual journey. Whilst in reality I am not much of a traveller - quite content to stay at home - I have been an armchair pilgrim for many years, devouring books and ideas in a restless search for answers to life's complex questions.

But more recently I am finding the intensity of the search is lessening – I am more content to allow answers - such as there are - to find me. Maybe I am just more settled in my life circumstances now, but I also think developing a meditation practice, which encourages me to be more attentive to the present moment, has helped. Maybe it's no coincidence that the Buddha found enlightenment, not during his wanderings after truth, but when sitting still under the Bodhi tree.

When I pack for a holiday I always take too much, prepared for every eventually (as Rob, my husband, who ends up carrying most of it, can attest!) But too much

baggage can hamper us. On our journey through life it can be difficult to travel in the moment, trusting that tomorrow will take care of itself. Too often we load ourselves with provisions and plans for the future that weigh us down. I am struck by the wisdom of the scallop shell – symbol of pilgrimage and St James, whose shrine is at Santiago de Compostela in Spain. In Mediaeval times pilgrims wore a scallop shell as a sign of being on pilgrimage, but they also used it as a plate and cup to gather water and food. I have read that pilgrims would present themselves at churches and abbeys asking for food, and would be given only as much as would fit into the shell - not food for tomorrow – or the next day – but only enough for the *now* – another reminder about the need to live in the present moment.

But perhaps we can stop travelling and let go of the search for new experiences and destinations, content to stay where we are, only *after* we have worn ourselves out searching. The need first to leave home and create some distance from the familiar; perhaps only then, can we return and see with new eyes the riches on our doorstep. We may already have all we need, but we don't know it – like the Prodigal son in the Gospel story who travels to strange lands intent on new experiences, until in his weariness, he returns home to the love and goodness that was there all along.

I don't know about you, but good as it is to go on holiday and see new places, I am always glad to return home. I feel a renewed sense of appreciation each time I return – glad to be back in a familiar space with my things around me, glad to sleep in my own bed and eat my own food. So in our spiritual explorations, we set out on new paths, sometimes only to return to where we started. I needed to create some distance from my Christian roots in order to find the spiritual path that was right for me, but I now find I am able to recognise afresh some of the treasures that lay within those early teachings. In the words of T.S Eliot, perhaps *“the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time”*.

So to sum up, whilst the metaphor of the journey, the active search for meaning is an apt one, as we travel through life - we need also to keep in mind the words of Wendell Berry who says this:

*“And the world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey – a journey of one inch - Very arduous, humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground of our feet and learn to be at home.”*