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“Steps Together, Steps Apart”
Victoria Ingram

I never intended to be a minister. I feel like I need to say that right up front, in a spirit of full disclosure. Please don't panic! Your Intern Committee did act with “due diligence” in selecting me as your intern, because I DO intend to be a minister now, and I'm delighted to be serving this community as a part of my preparation process. One of my goals for this sermon is to tell you something about me, by way of introduction, as we start our learning relationship.

Growing up in the 50s and 60s, I knew no women ministers, which may explain why I never considered ministry as an option. Or, maybe it was some of my early experiences of religious leadership.

I vividly recall one Sunday School class when I was about six. We attended the First Presbyterian Church in Salem, Oregon and my mother had dropped me off at my classroom before the adult service. Our lesson that day was on the Exodus. After all of us young people were seated, we listened to the story of how Moses, a Jew, had come to grow up in Pharaoh's household. Then came the amazing part about Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.

Enthusiastically, our teacher told us that we would have the chance to experience this great story ourselves, because we were going to recreate the escape right there in our classroom. A dozen or so of us kids were led to a pile of old bathrobes and work shirts in a corner of the room. We each got into costume, adults tying scarves around our middles and rolling up sleeves to outfit us as Israelite slaves of the Pharoic age. We each received the traditional headgear of that time – a bath towel draped over our heads and tied with another scarf. Some of us carried stuffed lambs, others had baby dolls, and a few were issued pillow cases stuffed with more towels as burdens to be carried on our backs as we escaped slavery's grasp.

When everyone was ready, a boy was selected to be Moses. Even at six, my heart beat with a feminist fervor, and I remember feeling angry that a boy got to be Moses. I felt that our Sunday School lessons were way too heavily populated with boy stories and not nearly enough girl stories, and I wondered what the authors of the Bible had been thinking.

Anyway, we lined up behind this Moses-in-miniature and moved around as a herd through the room. Of course, we eventually reached the “Red Sea,” which in our case consisted of all of the child-sized tables and chairs pushed together to form a barrier to our trek. “Moses,” with assistance from the teacher, parted the chairs and tables by pushing them aside, and our happy band of escaping slaves scampered through the divide to the other side of the “sea.” When everyone was safely through, the desks and chairs were pushed back together again, leaving us Israelites rejoicing in freedom in our new “land.”

Over 40 years later – years filled with multiple viewings of “The Ten Commandments,” by the way, as well as study that has helped me develop a more adult understanding of this story – it’s hard for me to remember exactly what my six year old mind made of the epic that day in Sunday School. It does fascinate me that this is one of my strongest memories from over 10 years of Presbyterian Sunday School.

As an adult, the story of the Israelite escape from Egypt is actually one of my favorite metaphors for dealing with life changes. Like the Israelites, I’ve wandered on my way to find a spiritual home. There have been times when I felt I was in a parched, dry desert, far from any hope of comfort and happiness. There have been other times that felt like a cool and welcoming oasis, a desert respite, where I was refreshed and renewed.

While we’re still in my childhood, I’ll share another vivid childhood memory. This one involves long, hot summer road trips from Oregon to eastern Kansas to see my Grandmother. While all the trips sort of run together in my mind at this point, I do recall one specific place along that journey where we came to the edge of the mountains in Colorado and begin to descend onto the Great Plains of Kansas. There is a place I remember where we looked out and saw the highway stretching almost infinitely in front of us, straight and unswerving, as if all the through Kansas to Missouri. It amazed me. I’d never seen a road so flat and straight in my young life!

Some people seem to have lives like that highway. They just seem to know where they are going. They discern their spiritual path and they move on their journey, focused and purposeful, seemingly sure of their destination. Sometimes, I envy them.

Because my journey has taken me in ways much more like the rural back roads of my Oregon girlhood, up hills and down dales, around corners and over creeks, sometimes paved, but often dusty and rutted. You probably know the kinds of roads I’m talking about. The ones where you can’t see beyond the next curve; where what’s coming next isn’t obvious. Like those kinds of roads, my spiritual path has taken a more winding route, at times leaving me to discover my truth only when I finally find myself in the middle of it.

We are assured by **Lord of the Rings** author JRR Tolkien that “not all who wander are lost.” Since I joined the community of Unitarian Universalists, I’ve met many others like me, people for whom the path to spiritual awareness and wholeness has been more winding than straight. Perhaps that’s true for you, as well.

As a young adult, I once had a conversation with my mother about the doubts and concerns I felt about being a Presbyterian and calling myself a Christian. Like Michael Servetus, Francis David and countless others in our faith heritage, I could not find justification for the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. Great teacher – yes, absolutely. But, divine? No, that I didn’t believe. I was struggling to find my integrity, unable to repeat creeds that no longer seemed true for me.

It was painful to find myself at this crossroads of belief and I needed to talk it out with someone. While I knew my mother was faithfully Christian, I also knew her to be a calm and rational person who would hear me out and help me sort out my thoughts. After listening to me pour out my confusion, my mother gently said, "Honey, perhaps you should go try the Unitarian Universalists. You might feel like you fit in better with them." A wise woman, indeed.

I wish I could say that I listened to her and immediately went to join the local UU community. Perhaps it would have saved me some amount of pain and frustration, or shaved years off of my wandering around and trying to find my way.

But life isn't about the choices we didn't make, it's about living with the choices we do make. And I didn't actually get involved with Unitarian Universalism until I was nearing 40 and met my husband, Carl. He'd been an active UU for two decades and told me that it was important to him, if we were to be a couple, that we find a spiritual community together. So, we began to attend church. Little did I know - I certainly never expected it to lead to this!

In the 20 years between that conversation with my Mom and actually finding Unitarian Universalism, I explored my spiritual path individually, finding my way by trial and error, but always with a great deal of curiosity and openness. I experienced and learned so very much by wandering around, by occasionally making good choices and sometimes making poor ones. I learned things on my own and experienced things in relationship with others. For all of us, I think, there are times in the process of life when we take steps together; and there are times when we take steps alone.

While on this quest, I've found my time in community to be important as a crucible for my spiritual development and growth. There's only so much you can know about yourself, in isolation. It takes seeing yourself in the mirror of another's experience of you to get a glimpse of the full picture. There's just spots you can't see by yourself. Others have to be there to hold up the mirror, at just the right angle, so you can get the details as well as the big picture. Sometimes they help you see the positive aspects of yourself that you've simply not seen. More likely, they help point out the rough spots - the not-so-pretty aspects of yourself that you sort of hope no one knows about.

Did I mention that I never intended to be a minister? Well, one day about 4 years ago, I was sitting at my desk at the office. I worked as an internal organization development consultant for a large corporation in the Bay Area and I really liked my job. I'd finally achieved a level of "success" I'd hoped for for many years - great job, great pay, and great opportunity. I was sitting pretty. At least, that's what I thought.

That day, as I listened to my colleagues discuss the latest book on leadership theory or change management or something, I heard a Voice head say, "I don't care." That's Voice, with a capital "V" and I tried to ignore it. But, truthfully, I knew my life was about to change, again. I said back to the Voice - "Okay, so I don't care. If I did care, what would it be that I care about?" The reply to my inquiry surprised me. "Well," said

the Voice, “there is that ministry thing you’ve been avoiding.” I wanted to avoid any more of this conversation, but then I realized, well, YES, there IS this ministry thing.

Frankly, it took me awhile to get to the point where I could imagine myself as a minister. Having not lived an entirely virtuous life, I wasn’t sure I was “minister material.” Tentatively, I shared my potential career plan with friends and loved ones. To a person, their response was affirming, “Oh, yes! That’s a great idea. It’s so right for you.” My community, it seemed, once again knew more about me than I knew about myself!

There is dynamism, a tension, between individual practice and participating in community. I learn things, then I need to go try it out with others to see how it works in the “real world.” We need both time alone and time with others, because both contribute to our development as human beings. While time alone for reflection is important, it is in community that we find support and feedback, encouragement and a place to be of service. Choosing positive communities in which to participate has spurs me to learn more, expand my thinking, experience more, and live life more fully.

Now, certainly, there are also communities that will help reinforce your bad choices. Twenty years ago, when I was still drinking, there were plenty of people around. I had “friends” who colluded with me in being miserable and in encouraged me to stay that way. While I was around these other people in those dark times in my life, mostly I felt alone – utterly and completely alone.

When I started to attend a Unitarian Universalist church and learned the Seven Principles, I felt like I’d found a true spiritual home, a place where I could be in community with like-minded, and open minded, people of faith who share my values and commitment to creating a just and equitable world. Our Principles speak to the covenant we affirm for taking steps together on our mutual journey. The UU communities in which I’ve been involved have been places where I felt I could show up and be embraced for who and what I am. In this movement, I’ve been encouraged and supported to make positive choices while walking hand-in-hand with others on life’s journey.

My journey has also held important lessons for me about the states of being I want to embody to enhance my ability to be a contributor in the world. For me, the best articulation of my desired approach to life is found in Angeles Arrien’s book, **The Four Fold Way**. Dr. Arrien, an author and anthropologist, has studied and written about the ways of indigenous cultures and in this book describes four elements for walking a “mystical path with practical feet” –

- show up and be present,
- pay attention to what has heart and meaning,
- tell the truth without blame or judgment, and
- be open to outcome, but not attached to outcome.

I’ll tell you a bit more about each these in just a moment. They are not unique to **The Four Fold Way**. You’ll find similar strategies articulated in many of the world’s faith and philosophical traditions. Jesus’ word and teachings echo these concepts, and I think

you'll hear how they resonate with Rev. Straube's discussion last week of the Buddha's "heavenly abodes."

The first of the four ways is the way of the warrior - to show up and be present. By fully showing up in the situations of our lives, and choosing to be present to them, we demonstrate our honor and respect for ourselves and for others. This leads us to appreciate the diversity within ourselves and within those around us, staying open and flexible in our interactions.

Secondly, in the way of the healer, we're asked to pay attention to what has heart and meaning. Focusing in this way allows us to experience the power of love, of acknowledgement, of validation, of gratitude. To nurture our spiritual health, we look to our heart-centeredness and attend to the world from that place. Are we full-hearted, open-hearted, clear-hearted, and strong-hearted?

The path of the visionary is third, and here we tell the truth, without blame or judgment. The visionary aspect of ourselves includes our creative purpose and life dreams. Here we are called to know and act from our authentic self, coming forward fully with our gifts and talents. Gandhi spoke to the visionary when he said, "My life is my message."

Lastly, embracing the way of the teacher, we allow ourselves to be open to outcome, but not attached to specific results or conclusions. This is a practice in trust and detachment, calling on us to develop and use our wisdom to discern. As Dr. Arrien says, "Wisdom is at work when we are open to all options."

I strive to include the Four Fold Way states of being in my personal repertoire because I've found that when I use them as my guide, I'm a happier and more effective human being. These guides allow me to live in greater congruence with who I am and the person I hope to be. Following the Four Fold Way, I can be there for others while holding my own integrity. These four ways define, for me, the best way I've found for me to take my steps alone as well as my steps together with others.

My goal is to approach my life following the path of the Four Fold Way. Do I always get it right? No, I don't. Ralph Waldo Emerson wisely noted that life is a journey, not a destination. Some of the practices are easier for me than others. I'm always in process, always working to see how closely I can live in this moment in integrity with my values and beliefs. Some moments, I'm really close. Many times, I fall short. At those times, I pick myself up, ask for forgiveness (from myself and others) and try again. I expect to be working to master this process for the rest of my days.

Moving into a ministerial identity has been a process for me, as well, starting with taking the step of applying to Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley and resulting in my standing before you today. I've experienced some endings to get to this new beginning - leaving the Bay Area, selling our home, saying goodbye to friends and loved ones. But, as T.S. Eliot notes, those endings will be where this beginning starts from.

My steps have brought me to this congregation, at this time, to be with all of you. Now, we begin taking steps together, teaching and learning from one another. I'm interested in exploring ways in which we can worship together, experiencing the fullness of life and celebrating the gift of community. I hope your schedule allows you to join me at Vespers services. I look forward to hearing your story, to sharing your journey, and to being a witness along your path. My door and heart are open and I hope we find ways to share with each other. To become the best minister I can be, I look forward to experiencing this congregation as each of us strive to become the best people we can possibly be. Let's step together and see what waits for us around the next bend.

Blessed be.