



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“I’m Not Lost, I’m Exploring”

© by Jim Leebens-Mack and Michelle Leebens-Mack

a Service presented by Jim Leebens-Mack and Michelle Leebens-Mack on June 18, 2017
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Centering Thoughts:

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new sights, but in looking with new eyes.”
Marcel Proust

“If travel is like love, it is, in the end, mostly because it’s a heightened state of awareness, in which we are mindful, receptive, if dimmed by familiarity and ready to be transformed.”
Pico Iyer

Call to Worship:

Michelle: It is said the ancient Celts believed the Celtic knot to be a potent symbol of life’s journey. Each thread, as it wandered from the center and whorled back again, showed the desire to return to the source to replenish the soul. This month of June, the fellowship theme for exploration is Adventure.

How many faith traditions challenge members to do just that—to explore? The Unitarian Universalist Fourth Principle calls us “to affirm and promote a free and responsible *search* for truth and meaning.” To explore! To explore is so much more than traveling. Traveling is an opportunity that is a privilege that not everyone can do. Instead, how do we bring the concept of searching into our daily lives? Jim and I wanted to explore the concept of how we find adventure in our lives beyond traveling the world. How do we ascribe worth to getting lost and those mundane things in our lives?

Jim’s Reflection

As many of you know, Michelle and I have moved around a lot over the 36 years we have been together. Until arriving in Athens eleven years ago we were academic gypsies, and beyond that we have always enjoyed travelling, often giving ourselves that latitude to get lost and expose ourselves to the unexpected. We were on a car trip somewhere—I can’t remember when or where—and one of us asked the other, “Where are we? Are we lost?” and the other responded, “I’m not lost, I’m exploring.” I’m not sure whether we ripped the expression off from song writer Janis Stanfield or we converged on it. In any case, over the years, we have had lots of opportunities to repeat it. When we were living in Nashville, Michelle found the bumper sticker, and I think you can see the 3rd or 4th iteration of it on our Honda Fit.

As my thoughts for the reflections I am sharing with you now were marinating over the last few weeks, I have come to realize that the strategy of reframing a sense of being lost as an opportunity for exploration has been a guiding principle in my personal life since childhood. At 12 or 13, I went to Boy Scout camp, Camp Ma-Ka-Ja-Wan in Northern Wisconsin. I was a terrible Boy Scout, but I loved camping and the outdoors. One day at Camp Ma-Ka-Ja-Wan, I decided to strike out on my own and, after about 30 minutes, I found myself lost in the woods. . . . A sense of panic welled up—hairs on the back of my neck started to stand up—but then I noticed a tree with porcupine damage, I heard the loud rapid-fire drumming of a pileated woodpecker searching for food in a dead snag, I walked through a patch of bracken fern and inhaled that sweet hay-scent and I was no longer lost, I was exploring. . . . A deep sense of anxiety was transformed into a sense of wonder and adventure.

Since then—and likely before then—I have had similar experiences throughout my life: We're pregnant? I'm a husband? I'm a father? Again? Job searches . . . To be honest, each of these experiences started with a sense of panic and then the experience was reframed to inspire a sense of adventure.

In my professional life as a biologist, I build models or interpretations that explain the patterns I see in nature, but often, after collecting or analyzing new data, I am forced to reject my pet hypotheses. I initially feel that same anxiety of being lost, but then comes the joy and adventure of formulating and testing new hypotheses. And writing! The transition from anxiety to adventure when writing a grant proposal or research paper typically remains drawn out for me.

Well, life can be complicated, and reframing the feeling of being lost as a learning opportunity is often not easy. But, maybe it gets easier as we develop our skills as observant and enthusiastic explorers. I invite you to occasionally embrace the unknown when it confronts you, and consider the notion that you're not lost, you're exploring!

Michelle's Reflection:

Jim and I have been together for many years now—since high school, as a matter of fact. Our life together has been one built on travel and exploring, one of adventure. When we were first dating, and he was driving me home, we'd play with the idea of running away from it all—not making the turnoff from the highway and to keep driving, and driving, and driving. What would we see along the way? What would happen if we were to keep driving till we ran out of gas? What would happen if we were to keep driving till we came to the coast of California?

Fast forward just a couple of years, our daughter, Heather was just a toddler. Our little family had joined Jim traveling to the Door Peninsula of Wisconsin as he did work on his Master's project. Our final day, we took the ferry to one of the islands to spend the night camping. We were awoken the next morning to Heather standing at the window of our little tent. She breathed in as each wave crashed against the shore, and she exhaled loudly with a "Wow!" as the waves of Lake Michigan retreated once again. This delight and the awe of seeing the waves for the first time—as adults, we forget to appreciate these simple things and take them for granted.

With the eyes of our children, we have the opportunity to appreciate the beauty of a flower. We can have our eyes again opened to the magic of little things, a lady bug crawling up the arm—"He's tickling me!" When was the last time that you took joy in the little things?

In 2015, I joined a group of UU's on a pilgrimage to visit our sister congregation in

Okland, Romania. Along our way from Budapest to this tiny hamlet, we had planned many visits. Robin Williams, a member of our group, suggested that we visit a salt mine in Turda. Now, I'm not fond of enclosed spaces, but I was delighted to find this place to be magical! The smooth, cool walls, the echoes of the voices, the lights, the wide cavernous space. There was even an amusement park at the base of this journey down to the bottom of the mine. I felt like a child. As an adult, when was the last time you experienced the joy and wonder, feeling like a kid again?

Though not as capable and artistic as Lee Reed, who shared with us the majestic pictures from his travels last week, I, too, love to document my travel with pictures. I want to capture the moment, to stuff it in my pocket, put it into a book, afraid that it will slip away, that I will forget. But, in doing so, I have found that I may miss out on some experiences. We took my father-in-law on a tour to the land of our ancestors, Ireland. We toured the bay by the small town of Cobh. I stood on the front of the boat with the shutter of the camera going—Click! Click! Click! I don't remember what it was that made me stop. But, a little voice said to me to just stop and feel the wind on my face, taste the salt, drink in the views, and simply be present. Doing so brought a sense of peace to me. When have you simply stopped and been witness to the beauty around you? Put down your electronic devices, turned off the radio, stepped away from the computer?

The "I'm not Lost, I'm Exploring" bumper sticker became a game that my children and I would play. We'd be coming home from the store. Each child would take a turn telling me to turn Left or Right. We would meander through the hills and valleys of Up-State New York or central Pennsylvania, turning left, and, perhaps, another left, simply seeing where this new road would take us. We'd sometimes get lost, run into a dead end, but there were no worries as we explored the farm fields and found new little towns that we had heard of but not yet visited.

I love traveling. I love exploring new places. I love trying new foods. I love meeting and getting to know new people. I love to learn about new peoples, their countries and their cultures. I often attack my travel with reading about the history, wanting to understand and appreciate their stories. Like a good UU, I look at and approach things with my head, thinking about things. But, to experience things with my heart? To be present, appreciating things just as they are, I am forced to come out of my head, become attuned to my senses, and to simply be present and aware—and, sometimes, just to play. . . .

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. Tell about a time that you simply stopped and witnessed the beauty around you.
2. Recall and share a time when you viewed the world with the fresh eyes of a child. What new insights or deeper sense of appreciation did you gain?
3. Describe a time when you reframed a sense of being lost as an opportunity, a chance to learn something new.