

The Journey, Not the Destination: Spirituality Through the Adventure of Travel

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Service presented by Lee Reed and Clela Reed

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Centering Thoughts

“The moment one gives close attention to any thing, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.” Henry Miller

“[T]his way of simple attention, bare presence, is the path of wisdom, the journey of heaven, the way home. . . Again, attention is the great solvent. Attending, paying attention, we discover how wide the mind is, how great is the field of consciousness. . . . Over the centuries people have grown deep and wise engaging the ways of clarity and attention.” from [This Very Moment](#), James Ishmael Ford, Zen priest and Unitarian Universalist Minister

“Instructions for living a life: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.” Mary Oliver

Call to Shape Things of Worth

Lee: Good morning. The theme of services for the month of June is "Adventure." When Myrna asked Clela and me if we would lead an adventure-themed service on travel illustrated by Clela's poetry and my photography, my first reaction was "What???" What does an adventurous trip have to do with our principles of Unitarian Universalism?

But then I actually thought about our UU principles. The adventure of travel has potential for broadening our human experience. It can lead us toward the goal of world community, a better grasp of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and a respect for the interdependent web of all existence. Essentially, I think that is what Samuel Clemens, Mark Twain, was referencing when he wrote, "“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views . . . cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.”"

Understanding these connections with our UU principles, I then had another realization. The adventure of travel can also connect to our spiritual growth in a way that we may not commonly appreciate but which ties into both poetry and photography and, of course, our UU principles. Travel makes us attend to new sights and sounds. Our minds that in our daily lives are all too frequently habituated by the thoughts of future and past are cleansed in our journeys through attention. And attention is at the heart of meditation, prayer, and all serious arts. Clela and I hope to illustrate this attention through our poetry and photography, leading back to our ultimate conviction that life itself, even daily life, is the greatest adventure of all, which deserves our most constant attention. As the Zen teacher exclaimed to his questioning neophytes: "Attention, attention, attention! There, I've told you everything".

Homily

Lee: “Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer,” wrote French poet and philosopher Simone Weil. A Buddhist maintained, "Perfect attention is perfect prayer." Jesus admonished, "Unless you can come again as a little child, you will never know the kingdom of heaven."

My conclusion is that Jesus was referring to the attention that children give to the world, the bare awareness they give to the present moment. This present moment.

The purpose of meditation is to bring our minds to this present moment with attention. "Attention, attention, attention, There I have told you everything." How many different kinds of meditation can you name? There are a great many, and they all focus our attention on this present moment, the eternal Now. There is yoga, and counting the rosary; there is observing the breath, and the Prayer of Jesus; there is mindfulness and the mandala and the mantra and the koan and Zen. There is the beautiful walking meditation of the Navajo: "I walk in beauty, beauty before me, beauty behind me, beauty above me and below me. I walk in beauty. I walk in beauty." There is the dancing meditation of the dervishes, and Amber's meditation of music.

For Clela the preparation for poetry is a form of attention that can be cultivated by travel when the daily habits of our minds are overturned through the adventure of new sights and sounds. For me, the preparation for photography serves the same mindful, the same attentional purpose. Photography often requires waiting for the light to get just right. The intensity of observation before photography is a type of meditation.

<Mr. Reed showed 19 meditative photographs and discussed how he focused on the exact light, expression, and moment to capture the shot.>

Although we didn't start traveling a whole lot until we retired, Clela and I have certainly enjoyed our travel. We have attended to many things: new sights and sounds, new food, interesting people, the same sunrises and sunsets but in wonderful new contexts. But we have also enjoyed coming home. We live in a forest and after travel have tried to imagine how travelers from other places would look with their eyes at our forest and its great beauty, which we see every day, four seasons of the year. After travel, we ourselves attend with new minds to the everyday things around us.

Ansell Adams' friend and fellow photographer Dorothea Lange wrote him of the awe she felt at flying past the snowcapped Himalayas. Adams wrote her back:

"People wonder why I don't express more interest in traveling around the world. The fact is I really haven't completed exploration of my backyard! I am envious over your flying by the Himalayas! But – after all – the other day I walked by some fresh green moss in my garden; ... that moss looked mighty impressive to me."

In the final analysis, it is the journey of our lives that is the greatest adventure, and if we will but attend to it without always worrying about the past and imagining the future and always talking to ourselves about what we've got to do and thus separating ourselves from this incredible present, this present moment, if we will but attend to what is, life will become the adventure it should be.

St. Augustine wrote in *The Confessions*: "People travel to wonder at the height of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars; and they pass by themselves without wondering."

It's called many things in the world's religions: enlightenment, satori, The Friend, the Great Spirit, the kingdom of God. I call it in contemporary but no less amazing terms the realization, the experience, that we have absolute identity with our universe. The universe and we are not two. The consciousness we are is the stuff of stars. "What is within us is also without. What is without is also within," says the *Katha Upanishad*. The *Upanishads* were written half a millennium before Jesus, but I think that coming from another tradition Jesus meant the same thing when he said, "Neither shall they say, 'Lo here! or, lo there!' for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you (Luke 17:21). And all we have to do is realize this. How? Attention, attention, attention. By attending to what is already in us we have the greatest adventure of all.

The following are copyrighted and previously published poems by Clela Reed, which she read during the service:

At the Byodo-In Temple

The solitary note of the great bronze bell
fades as it folds into the mountains.
The Buddha does not blink.

Curves of raked sand
flow from polished stones
in calm, concentric lines.
Ferns and flowers blend
peacefully in the ground shimmer
from trees. A small stream
stumbles over pebbles
under the arched footbridge,
and then moves down sculpted falls

and into the pond
where throngs of hungry koi
thrust their bodies upon each other,
opening and closing mouths
in a slippery competition.
Their rolling boil of gold and red
scents the air with the smell of living flesh
which, even several feet away, annuls

the temple's incense,
those delicate, ascending threads
of sandalwood, ginseng, clove.

Illumination

That afternoon
 as the plane smooth-banked
over Miami (her thoughts flying a
 more turbulent course),
squares of sudden sunlight
 stretched and leapt from tilting
windows, flew throughout the cabin,
 spotlighting objects only recently
mundane,
now in fresh-gilt clarity, ablaze with
 cock-eyed blessing in a random
universe.
And for that moment
 (born in twisting levitation),
nothing on the earth below
 and nothing that would later come
mattered.

Epiphyte

Swaying in winds that neither rip
nor soothe, but simply are,
we watch the constant star.
We forget our fear of falling,
and while from far below,
the rooted see their sky as
only mottled leaves like countless
hands held high in supplication,
we look up and *gasp* at constellations
sharp against the blackest blue,
patterns clear for those
who live above the shield,
who perch as vincible
as flesh to all the buzzing hive.

Seeking light and holding fast,
we've found this place at last
where we can grow,
this good green place of peace.
Above the shadowed ground,
the sun and swelling moon mother us
with light. We store it away
like hope. We face gray rain
and take from the shrouding mists
what life requires.
The surge of rising wings
around us and above
urges us toward our own amazement
and we gather strength to bloom.

Recognition

I own a face familiar; others know me
when they don't. Entering the crowded plane
or busy shop, I see the glance unguarded
that stops and squints, the double take
quick-shifting into the studied stare
at nothing there, just far away from me.
Eyes of muddled green, skin equivocating beige
that changes with the hour and the light
(imagine
cliffs of clay), nose with ethnic implication rising
in vagueness between the high-boned hills of
cheeks
(topography of many tribes) above the mouth

of medium pout, the chin of medium point.
 “You look familiar...” they say, moist hand in
 mine
 to handshake memory, or, “I think we may have
 met before...”
 or, “Don’t I know you, dear?” I have that kind of
 face.

So that day in the Burmese market, the stares
 at first
 meant nothing. Left to take my hundred shots,
 to freeze
 hot time into framed submission, turning to
 include

all views—the silks, the gourds, the heads piled
 high
 with big-leafed greens, the tight displays of
 fruit, the cart
 across the square, ox-drawn mountain of
 melons, children

dancing by its side, and the women’s clay-
 brushed faces,
 their dignity and grace, the skirted men,
 surprising in appeal,
 and the riveting red of the monks’ rough
 garments,

the golden Buddha carvings—I snapped all
 these
 in tourist hunger, letting brown-eyed stares
 ricochet
 from my camera lens and dusty skin. Until

I saw that day what they were seeing. Yellow-
 haired
 and towering presence, dressed in lycra slacks,

large tote swinging, camera clicking, glossy
 lipstick

(coveted and rare) beaming bright beneath the
 viewer,
 I was for them in the world that spawned them,
 the only subject exotic, the one face unfamiliar.

Ile D’Orleans, Quebec

Summer thunder over the St. Lawrence,
 too loud
 in morning fog,
 rattled the old inn’s windows
 and shook in me
 the soft core caged in ribs.

But it passed,
 rolling down the river island
 and toward the sea,
 leaving me floating blank
 on this persistent bed,
 hearing the distant rumble
 like hunger, more memory than sound,
 echo all the whispered dreams, recited plans
 and lovers’ lyrics shouted once to sky
 now lost in mumbled
 decrescendo,

words
 bump ing
 soft ly
 in
 to
 time.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. How does travel relate to our Unitarian Universalist principles?
2. What is it about the adventure of travel that gives us a type of meditation?
3. What do we say is the “ultimate adventure”?