

Wandering in the Desert  
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, September 19<sup>th</sup> and the title of this morning's service is Wandering in the Desert. It explores the experience of wandering—in the forest, in the darkness, in the desert. There are many different settings. In a song called Wandering, James Taylor writes,

I've been wandering early and late  
From New York City to the Golden Gate,  
And it don't look like I'll ever stop my wandering.

Along a journey of six verses we learn a lot about this man's story—about his family, his love, his life... He sings,

I've been in the army, I've worked on a farm  
and all I've got to show is the muscle in my arm,  
and it don't look like I'll ever stop my wandering.

The song makes you kind of wonder if he ever will, if we ever will, stop ourselves from wandering. Maybe we're not supposed to stop. Maybe all of the wandering is a good thing somehow. The song is a lament but that doesn't mean that wandering is bad. It means that the author is searching for something—for purpose, maybe...or definition...or maybe for meaning in life... The song provides no answers, departs no wisdom, renders no judgment, offers no help, teaches no lesson. It simply is—the journey of an honest life lived. No needs—neither for punishment nor praise.

Wandering in the Bible is often a consequential experience and a costly one...and wandering in the desert is often penalty. Passages about wandering appear many times—throughout the Book of Deuteronomy, commonly in Numbers and also commonly in the Psalms. Wandering appears in the Book of Joshua as well, wherein they mention “milk and honey,” milk and honey being among the things that are held off from us when we are out there wandering in the desert.

I feel like we wander sometimes as a country and as a culture...or as a set of cultures trying to become country, united and true. I feel this way when I watch news stories about the COVID culture wars, when I watch the women's gymnastics team call out Larry Nasser and the FBI for dragging its feet in that abuse investigation, when I think about the January 6<sup>th</sup> in D.C. and the aftermath. Sometimes, I fear that we're broken somehow, wandering in circles in a sea of dryness...but then I think better of it. I stop being so dramatic, stop being the frantic wildman with a hammer and a dream. I stop for a moment and I grow. I get a little better at the art of life, better at the art of living...and something gently heals in me in love and in humility, I more deeply appreciate the journey. To all souls, I say good morning. It is good to be together.

t can be useful. One should, at the very least, try to play the trumpet...or attempt, even once, to make a good soufflé. It's good to take a stab at doing something that is difficult when you know it can be done. It's humbling when we discover that we cannot immediately do it well...and it might not feel very good at the time but it engenders humility. That humility blunts the sharper edges of our lives just a bit. It wears down the harsh and unsmooth surface of the personality. It keeps us honest. It keeps us grounded. It keeps us true. It keeps us real. It keeps us all in healthy relationship. Humility.

Because they make life look so easy on TV. To be a great artist, a great musician, an excellent trumpet player, it looks like all you have to do is don the right attitude, put on hip clothes and cool sunglasses... That's about half of the battle, right? Then, you just have to take the trumpet out of the case, stick one end of it in your mouth and blow and out of the other end—quite magically—comes the beautiful music, right? Of course, that's not true...and we find this out the moment we try it for the first time. And we sound terrible. And we're terribly loud. And the instrument is so hard to control. So, it's embarrassing. I think that's a good thing.

It's not true that all one has to do is don the right attitude. It's not true that all we have to do is take the instrument out of the case and play. It is true, however, that all we have to do is practice. We have to wander in the wilderness of terrible trumpet playing...before we can produce a work of art. It takes a lot of time to do things right. But when we put in the time—and when we're honest with ourselves—we all get slowly better over time. It's just that when we're putting in the time and effort, it feels like we're just wandering in the desert—lost and all alone. And maybe we are...maybe the point of it all is just to keep moving.

They make it look so easy on TV. They really do. To be a great chef, to make an excellent soufflé, it sure looks like all you have to do is don the right attitude, put on the white hat—the toque blanche, I guess they call it—and whip up the eggs just right. That's about half of the battle. Then, you just have to bake it in the oven...in that special dish they call a ramekin.

They make it look easy but it isn't, really. Things look easier than they are sometimes. When poets tell stories of high-flying men like John, we pay attention. John is fearless. He is brave. Hang glider. He starts his journey of adventure at the top of a mountain called Haleakala. Haleakala is a volcano that overlooks a beautiful valley in Hawaii.

Haleakala means “house of the sun” and is central to a legend about how the demigod Maui lassoed the sun from its journey across the sky as he stood on the volcano's summit, slowing its descent to make the day last longer. The poetry is beautiful...

A bright kite he's hanging from  
Jon rides a glider above the clouds  
He stepped off Haleakala  
Ten thousand feet above the ground  
High up over the mountain snow  
He rides the air up high and thin

Tell us now, we gotta know:  
How do you get to where you've been?  
Because you make it look easy

Lots of people make their lives looks easy...but life isn't easy. The poetry continues. In the second verse, it is a woman who is telling the tale. She doesn't hang glide. She rides the white water and the river waterfalls.

"Fun river to run," she says  
But "Class 5 Rapids" is what she means  
Weave through the boulders in one thin line  
No room to eddy-out between  
A 20-foot high falling wall  
She rides it down like easy fun  
What's the trick to falls that tall?  
How do you do the things you've done?  
Because you make it look easy

Lots of people make life look so easy...but really it's not. If you choose to grow in life, life is humbling for every one of us. No one is born as a top-shelf trumpet player. One takes an adventuresome journey to get to that point. It isn't easy but it behooves us to try, nevertheless...whether or not we get there. That doesn't matter. And no one is born as a chef in a five-star restaurant. We are not born at the top of world. We take journeys to get up there. Arduous ones. And all along the way, we are softened and made smooth by the tosses and turns of life. It's a long, long process and it's so important that we not take ourselves too seriously along the way. It's so important to enjoy the process—the wandering—and not speed toward the agreed-upon result.

Mindfully, theologian Alan Watts encourages us to slow down enough to enjoy the journeys we're on. Through his teachings, we learn to pause...and to listen...to tune in...to take stock of every moment that we can. Lightly. Softly. In good measure. Watts explains that the Japanese have a word for this. He says,  
The Japanese have a word—*yugyen*—and they describe *yugyen* as watching while geese fly and be hidden in the clouds, as watching a ship vanish behind a distant island, as wandering on and on in a great forest with no thought of return.

*Yugyen*... To watch with ease as the world unfolds with grace. *Yugyen*... To wander in great forests with no thoughts of return.

It occurs to me... In the realm of the spirit, we spend a lot of time wandering around, wandering in deserts or in forests, wherever have you, really. Watts asks... Haven't you done this? Haven't you gone on a walk with no particular purpose in mind? You carry a stick with you and occasionally hit at old stumps? You wander along and sometimes twiddle your thumbs? It is at that moment that you are a perfectly rational human being. You've learned purposelessness. All music is purposeless. Is music getting somewhere? If

the aim of a symphony were to get to the final bar, the best conductor would be the one who got there fastest.

Alan Watts is so striking and clear. He teaches us how to enjoy the arduous journey. He does not say that we, as spiritual seekers, need to travel more quickly on our paths and passageways. The adventuresome hang glider in Hawaii is floating like a cloud...in the air...above the valley. He is already moving at the perfect speed. He does not need the judgment of other's to enjoy the miracle. Alan Watts does not say that we should to travel more slowly on our paths and passageways. The river rapids runner, the falling water woman is coursing like quick silver in the flow. She, too, is already moving at the perfect speed and does not need the judgment of others.

But how is this? One seeker travels slowly and is moving at perfect speed and another seeker travels quickly and is also moving at perfect speed. These two speeds are different. How can also be the same? How can both be perfect in the SpiritLife of things? In Jonathan Livingston Seagull, his famous book of 1973, Richard Bach writes about this magical idea that he calls "perfect speed." He writes, Heaven is not a place, and it is not a time. Heaven is being perfect [by which he means accepting ourselves. And being perfect...] isn't flying at a thousand miles an hour, or a million, or flying at the speed of light. Because any number is a limit, and perfection doesn't have limits. Perfect speed, my [beloved, means] being there.

We put so much pressure on ourselves to do things well and quickly. We like to be productive, efficient. "Time is money" and all of that...but all of that isn't true. Time isn't money and money isn't time, no matter what they try to tell you. When we run out of one before the other, we realize quickly that the saying isn't true. It's cute and everything but it isn't all that helpful sometimes. The saying, "Time is money," is preoccupied with speed. We say, "Money makes the world go 'round" but money doesn't do that, really. If money really did make the world go 'round, we'd be able to pay for what we want. We'd be able to pay for different speeds...speeds that better suited our hectic schedules and our busy lives. If we had enough money, could we get the world to stop? Or could we slow it down a little...if we could afford it? But money can't stop time from moving. Nothing can. No one can—no matter how hard we try. I wish we could...

Stop this train  
I want to get off and go home again  
I can't take the speed it's moving in  
I know I can't  
But, honestly, won't someone stop this train?

Clouds, when they do move, do not move too slowly or too fast...and rivers, when they do run, do not move too quickly or too slow. It is we who are preoccupied with speed. Alan Watts asks,

Is music getting somewhere? If the aim of a symphony were to get to the final bar, the best conductors would be the ones who got there fastest. [Right?] When you dance, do you aim to arrive at a particular place on the floor? Is that the idea of dancing? [No.] The aim of dancing is to dance. [end quote]

I love Alan Watts. Through his teachings, I learn to pause...and to listen...to tune in...to take stock of every moment that I can. Otherwise, I become frustrated and I make a big mess of things. Then, I find myself all alone, wandering in the desert—lost, thirsty...walking around in circles.

When I'm frustrated, I lose my sense of humility. I become impatient. I lose respect for time. I want to be an excellent trumpet player on my very first try. I don't want to put in the effort. I don't want to practice. I don't want to grow. I just want to already be good at it. And I want to make excellent soufflés but I don't know how to do it just right and I don't know how to use the "ramekin" or whatever you call that thing.

You may know this but a ramekin is a small dish for baking and serving an individual portion of food. It is a French word of Low German or Dutch origin. It has Flemish roots as well.

When I first heard people using the word "ramekin," I didn't know what it meant. When I first heard the word, I misheard it. I thought that those people were talking about those storefront, window puppets, the ones that are wearing the latest styles in stores like Macy's or Bloomingdale's. I know now that they said, "ramekin" but I thought then that they said "mannequin." So, I was really confused. What they were saying about making soufflé wasn't making any sense. I thought, "Who would want to bake an elegant meal in a mannequin?"

I hope that some of you are laughing a little or maybe just thinking about it. That makes me happy for you but for me, the mannequin story is not a pleasant memory. This might sound a little weird but the mannequin has taught me a thing or two about life.

I'm not alone. There was a minister, a Universalist minister, a former friend of mine. Ric Masten out in California. He was a wonderful person. He died a few years ago...of pancreatic cancer. I miss the old man. He was my friend of spirit, genuinely. There aren't very many people like that. He wrote a short poem called Encounter. I will share with you now. It captures some of the frustration that I'm feeling these days. Maybe you too. Masten writes,

it was just that i was  
very touchy that day  
and really that's  
all i can say  
to explain why  
while walking through  
the sears & roebuck department store  
i happened to get into  
a fist fight with a mannequin

“I promise you, that mannequin was looking at me funny. I’m telling you, man! I’m serious! Then, he made that wise crack about my mother and—you know me, man—you just can’t treat me that way.” ☺ It was a bad day. It’s over now. We don’t have to talk about it. We’re moving on.

Times are hard right now. It’s easy to find ourselves wandering in the desert, alone. We had hoped for something different. We’d hoped for autumn safety after a summer of preparation. We’d hoped for a return to normal life but we didn’t get it. And that doesn’t feel very good but it’s part of the way things are right now. And we can meet this challenge. It’s easy enough to do. Sometimes life is an arduous journey but we can make it look easy... High up over the mountain snow, we can ride the air up high and thin. And someone might say, “Tell me now, I’ve gotta know: How do you get to where you've been?” And we can ride the 20-foot high falling wall of water, we can ride it down like easy fun. And someone might say “What's the trick to falls that tall? How do you do the things you've done?” because we will have made it look easy...by putting in the effort, by regular habits of practice, by agreeing to fly at perfect speed. It might look easy but...

Really it's driving long distance  
Dialing in the gear  
Studying the balance  
Quieting the fear  
It's healing up from all the hard landings  
It's overcoming all the tough breaks  
It's learning all of the lessons  
And making all the mistakes  
That's how we make it look easy

I was listening to the news the other day. I heard a long list of stories.

1. The women’s Olympic Gymnastics Team was blasting the FBI about the Larry Nassar case.
2. Occupy Wall Street was celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary and
3. Governor Gavin Newsome in California survived a recall effort, handily defeating his opponent by a margin of 2:1.

The recall story angered me all week. The recall effort cost California taxpayers about \$300 million. It cost a lot of money to say “No!” to a sitting governor. I’m glad they were unsuccessful. In his victory speech, Newsome turned that all the way around. He said,

I want to focus on what we said yes to as a state. We said yes to science. We said yes to vaccines. We said yes to ending this pandemic. We said yes to people’s right to vote without fear of fake fraud or voter suppression. We said yes to women’s fundamental, constitutional right to decide for herself what she does with her body, her fate and future. We said yes to diversity. We said yes to inclusion. We said yes to pluralism. ...

Newsome's opponent had only donned an attitude of excellent. He didn't practice. He didn't practice humility. He was like a wildman with a hammer and a dream. But he was trading on the health of true community. We should say "no!" to this...by a margin of 2:1.

We are not broken in this world and we're not at war with one another. We're just a little creaky at the hinges. We know that great decisions are before us and we don't know how to make them yet. We know there is a great challenge before us and it's clear that we are worried about it.

In 1962, when he first began to champion the space program, President John Kennedy referred to it as "the most hazardous and dangerous and greatest adventure on which man has ever embarked." Seven years later, we landed on the moon. Neal Armstrong said, "It's one small step for man and one giant leap for mankind." Things are harder for us now. Things are harder for humankind. It is easier "to put a man on the moon" than it is for us to realize, far more dramatically, that our lives are in one another's hands.

We are not broken. We just scared and stiff and a little creaky at the hinges. We're just in need of oil, the oil that we had once called wisdom. May we treasure it as it comes to us in a myriad of forms—in deserts and in great forests. Wisdom comes to us as humility in perfect speed. May we hold one another, in humility and grace, as we move forward in life together.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.