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Lost on the Freeway: Thoughts on Covenant and Asking for Directions

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The time: a dark October night, many years ago.

The place: somewhere in the labyrinth of the Washington, D.C. freeway system.

The road conditions: lousy, thanks to a light rain.

The situation: lost... in a rental car... in a strange city.

Technically, I was lucky to be there at all, because the next morning I would attend an academic conference – hobnobbing with the biggest names in my field – even though I was a lowly graduate student. A professor/mentor of mine at Tulane had learned about the conference and made a generous offer to me: if I found a cheap hotel and flight, he'd dig up some money to fund my trip.

It was a sweet deal, except for this “arriving” part. My rental car and I had spent the better part of an hour looping our way under overpasses and over underpasses, getting more lost with every exit that zipped by. I was no closer to the flea-bag hotel I'd booked, and I wasn't even sure where it *was*.

This was the time before cell phones and MapQuest. Remember those days? The only way to find your way to a strange destination was to *prepare* by trundling off to AAA and deciphering their sprawling maps (Did I do that? I was twenty-five years old. What do you think?), OR to throw your fates to humanity by calling long-distance and trusting, say, a hotel desk agent to provide precise and accurate directions from the airport. Ha.

As the rain fell harder, I realized that it was time to pull off the beltway and ask for directions.

Turning off at the next exit, I was relieved to see a large apartment building with a brightly lit lobby. I pulled into the portico, and as I walked into the building, I looked up. There, in huge letters, it said “WATERGATE APARTMENTS.” (My first thought – I kid you not – was: *Watergate. Hmmm. That building must be named after that scand— OH!!! The Watergate!*)

Inside the building (where I surreptitiously glanced around for Bob or Elizabeth Dole, who I imagined might be hanging out in the lobby), the distinguished concierge coolly directed me to my flea-bag hotel. It was one block – and a world – away... and *that's* the stranger-than-fiction twist to the story: I'd been driving in circles, lost in a rental car on the freeway, and – through sheer luck – stumbled my way straight to my destination.

It's rare, when we plunge into situations unprepared – unMapQuest'ed, uncharted – to end up where we intended to be.

Before embarking on a journey in unknown territory, the safest and wisest course of action is to prepare ahead of time. Snacks are important too, of course, and maybe a magazine, or a first-aid kit – if you're that type. But on any sojourn, we must have an idea of where we mean to go, and how we mean to get there. And when we get lost – on the Washington beltway or in the wilderness of broken relationship – we need to be willing to stop and ask for directions.

* Unitarian Universalists have known this, long before we were known as “Unitarian Universalists.” Ours is not a geographical journey, but an *ecclesiastical* one, and the “map” that's guided us as a people for three centuries is that of **covenant**. (Covenant, most simply, means “to come together.”) We wrapped ourselves in the fabric of covenant – the promise to walk together with love and caring – long before the term “right relationship” entered our lexicon.

The time: 1629.

The place: aboard the ship *Arabella*, as it crossed the Atlantic Ocean en route to the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The situation: the Puritans – those reformers and rebels, from whom we descend – elected as their Governor John Winthrop.

When the ship had safely pulled into port, Winthrop delivered a sermon that was both a prophetic call to love and a “strategic...institutional model”¹ for this new community. “The only way to avoid... shipwreck,” he counseled, “is... to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God.” That wasn't so radical for the seventeenth century (that's just Micah). The radical part came next, as he continued:

...We must be knit together in this work as one [body]. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection... We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other....

All the parts of this body... must needs partake of each other's strength and infirmity; joy and sorrow, weal and woe. If one member suffers, all suffer with it, if one be in honor, all rejoice with it... the ligaments of this body which knit together are love... no body can be perfect which wants its proper ligament.

From that moment forward, our religious history took a delightful, irrevocable turn. Winthrop was calling people to a new form of governance, a new way of doing “church”: people would direct *themselves*, with no outside interference from bishops, popes, or synods. Without that hierarchy, church members would be bound by a union, or a covenant, “by which the terms of their cooperation together are spelled out and agreed to.”²

It was a radical act for Governor Winthrop, and the colony of Puritans, to toss out *belief* as a measure of their religious integrity and replace it with covenant. What Winthrop understood, as Unitarian Universalists do today, is that “the structures people set up to manage themselves in [religious community]... is a visible testimony to what people say they believe.”³ That community – the country’s first expression of congregationalism – believed that “the only way to avoid shipwreck” was to *be* the love that knit them together, as ligaments are knit into our very bodies.

* At Live Oak, as inheritors of the congregationalist tradition, our lives are bound together in ways obvious and invisible. The ligaments of love weave through us and hold us together. Except when they fray. Except when, as happens from time to time, in congregations of every stripe and creed, we stray from the path of love and respect, or feel pulled to walk away from the “body which wants its proper ligament.” What to do, when that tension arises? How do we pull over and ask for directions?

What Unitarian Universalists have learned, and taught one another, over time is that being “in covenant” – the spirit of Beloved Community – is easier when there is a *particular* Covenant, a precise and unique document, to guide us... just as a map provides direction to the traveler, or a nautical chart offers safe passage through unknown waters.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve never warmed up to the Ten Commandments (not that I break them much...) – they’re so starchy and punitive-sounding, with their “thou shalt nots.” Rules and commandments are signposts of the forbidden, drawing attention to what’s neither possible nor permissible. “Stay off the rocks.” “Do not enter.” “Turn off cell phones.” Being reminded of limits doesn’t much foster a feeling of freedom and ease.

Big-C Covenants are different. Unlike commandments, which warn us where not to tread, Covenants call us into our best selves and best practices. They show us where the swiftest currents run, in the deepest channels, that might carry us safely and securely into relationship. In doing so, Covenants point to *possibility*, to great fields of freedom.

Here’s an example of what I mean: last month, I invited the staff – Russell and Jan, and later, Heidi – to create a staff Covenant, so that we might enrich our already-meaningful teamwork. A few days after we’d completed the Covenant (which you can read on the staff page of our website⁴), Russell called me.

“I’d like to talk to you for few minutes the next time we’re together,” he said. “It’s about our covenant.”⁵

Guess where I went first? Guess which conclusion my own timid heart arrived at? *The covenant talks about support and trust*, I reasoned quickly, *so Russell must want to talk about feeling unsupported, or offended. What did I do? Was it my teasing him? Was it circling the typo in the order of service?* (This was, I should mention, before he gave me a

mug that says “World’s Best Boss.”) I offered Russell a preemptive apology before we even hung up. I was still steeled when we sat down a few days later.

“Our covenant,” he began, “says that we staff members ‘share a commitment to deepen our relationships with one another.’ To deepen our relationship, I wanted you to know about some stuff going on in my personal life.”

Just like that, my guard dropped, and I was filled with a mix of relief, curiosity, and a hefty dose of gratitude – gratitude for Russell, as a person and a staff member; for the chance to get to know a new side of him; and for this new Covenant – this treasure map – we had created. Less than a week old, and our Covenant had already taken us to a new depth of sharing and trust.

But it’s rare, after all, when we plunge into situations unMapQuest’ed and uncharted – uncovenanted – to end up where we wanted to be.

“Where we want to be,” I believe – where all of us want to be – is meeting one another authentically. “Where we want to be” is knowing, and being known by, these kindred spirits around us. “Where we want to be” is holding faith that when our boat scrapes the shoals, or the car gets lost, we will not leave one another – we will (to switch metaphors) stay at the table, holding one another in the love that’s borne of commitment, until the way clears again.

✱ One of my colleagues⁶ calls our attention to a Quaker teacher named Douglas Steer, who

says that the ancient question “Who am I?” inevitably leads to a deeper one, “Whose am I?” – because there is no identity outside of relationship. You can’t be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose am I?” is to extend the question far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?

The time is now.

The place is here.

The situation is this: we belong to one another.

We’ve bound up our lives together; and need each other in ways both obvious and invisible. We live and thrive in relationship with one another, in order to remember and relish *whose* we are. As we knit ourselves together in love, as ligaments are knit together in a body, may we seek ways to create and celebrate covenant; and may we be gentle companions to one another.

May it be so.

Endnotes

1. “A Model of Christian Charity.” See <http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html>.
2. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congregationalism>
3. Elizabeth C. Nordbeck. See www.ucc.org/beliefs/theology/introduction-structure-as-a.html
4. <http://www.liveoakgoleta.org/content/view/17/32/>.
5. Russell gave me his permission to share this story.
6. The Rev. Victoria Safford, in her sermon “Remind Us Again, Brave Friends” at the Service of the Living Tradition, General Assembly 2008.