



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

The Art of Getting Lost

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When I was young, my dad used to take my two sisters and me camping every year. We'd pack up our van full of our supplies and set off for Mt. Graham in the Coronado National Forest. Now I have always thought of my Dad as an "aggressive adventurer" more focused on creating an experience than having every amenity.

He refused to use one of those park-in campgrounds with picnic tables, full bathrooms, camp store with showers. Oh no, he always insisted we find our very own camp spot off the beaten path, away from civilization. Sometimes we'd drive for a while looking for that perfect spot. There was some compromise in that with 3 young girls he didn't want to have to park so far away that we'd have to hike and haul too far into a campsite.

He would always find the perfect spot. We would set up our camp, create our own campfire circle—he'd send us off to find big rocks and dry wood while he did the heavy lifting. As we got older, my sisters and I would be overjoyed if the campsite even had one of those old fashioned wooden outhouses—now that was luxury! Dad was a great cook, so our camp food was also pretty luxurious. He'd make pancakes and eggs for breakfast, grilled chicken and foil wrapped baked potatoes cooked in the coals for dinner—and we got to drink all the soda we wanted. We were camping after all!

Once we'd settled in my sisters and I would venture off, exploring the wilderness around us and then constructing the most magnificent natural forts. We always camped for at least 3-4 days so by the time we left we had built multi-room mansions we were sad to leave behind.

What I learned from all of this was to embrace adventure, to relish the exploration and seek out the unknown. I think I have inherited some of that "aggressive adventurer" spirit!

Barbara Brown Taylor, the author of our second reading, recommends to readers that they find small ways to intentionally "get lost;" taking a new way to work or a new route on an afternoon walk. In this intentional getting lost, we push ourselves out of the familiar patterns and habits that often allow us to zone out. I sure as heck do not want to be like one of those cows trodding down the same tiny worn path day in and day out.

So I have spent much of my life looking for ways to "get lost". My husband and I have been lucky enough to spend our 20's traveling. There is nothing like being in a foreign country to help expedite the feeling of being lost--especially in places like Southeast Asia. Everything is different, the sights, sounds, smells, the language, even the bathrooms. I'm often the one who insists on stuffing the guidebook in my backpack and just setting off to find the hidden places without any tourists, eyes and ears open. It is always a little scary at first, but inevitably something surprising and wonderful happens.

I know this kind of aggressive adventuring isn't appealing to everyone. Your definition of aggressive might be different from mine, that's okay. It is about the adventure, it's why it is called a practice.

The beauty of Brown's whole book is that all of the practices she explores—getting lost is just one of them—are ordinary, everyday practices. Whether you are excited about taking up a practice of getting lost—it will inevitably happen. Even if you try and practice, life will throw you into the wilderness, often more than once. It could be something as simple as a flat tire or as devastating as the loss of a family member. How many of us have been lost in the wilderness after losing a loved one? The practice comes in what we do in those wilderness times, what wilderness skills do we draw upon?

The Israelites had to learn some serious wilderness skills being lost in the desert for 40 years. And they did not seem to like it very much. In fact, they complained bitterly. They begged to go back to the familiar cow paths of their bondage where at least they would get regular meals—the Promised Land? They could not even see it much less dream of it.

One could argue the Buddha, Mohammed and Jesus all have their own wilderness stories too, each facing a bit of life and suffering that was at times too painful to bear. Enlightenment and resurrection aside, even the most aggressive adventurers among us don't love being lost in those wilderness times, especially those we did not choose nor those over which we don't have much control. Because being lost leaves us vulnerable and exposed.

Barbara Brown Taylor calls this, "Exquisite vulnerability; recognizing something holy in that moment of knowing just how perishable you are. Getting lost consists of consenting to be lost because you have no choice. This consent becomes your choice as you explore the possibility that life is for you and not against you despite all the evidence to the contrary."

Nine and a half years ago, I was thrown deep, deep into the wilderness. I became a parent. Now becoming a parent for the first time—even for the most well-read and well prepared—is like being thrown into the wilderness. Joyful for many to be sure, but full of the unknown, a certain departure from the patterns and habits, comfort and familiarity of the life you lived before. But as parents we adapt to this new world (one of the best wilderness skills) and we learn to love it—most of the time.

But 9 years ago I found myself having contractions a full 9 ½ weeks before my due date. **Interestingly, this moment happened just 3 months after I began this job**—a whole other wilderness I'd just stepped into. In fact, I went into labor the night before my very first teacher training.

I arrived at the hospital and after four days of doctors and nurses working to stop my labor with various drugs, I delivered William, all 4 lbs. 3 oz. of him. I was lucky enough to hold him

for about a minute before he was rushed off to the neo-natal intensive care unit where he spent the next 7 weeks.

Talk about feeling lost. I'd only ever been in an intensive care unit for adults, not one for babies. I remember early on feeling so detached from everything, scared to engage with my surroundings, wondering how did this happen. Why did it happen to me?

Barbara Brown Taylor refers to this feeling of "being truly, seriously lost even though you know exactly where you are." Michael and I would spend the next seven weeks driving to the hospital every day for several hours a day to be with our baby. Here's the thing about the whole idea behind the title of the book, *An Altar in the World*. When you are lost and you must pay attention you begin to notice the altars in the world—the everyday sacred.

That incubator with the blue striped blanket draped across it, the rocking chair tucked neatly beside each baby's allotted space. Even the wires and feeding tubes and beeps of the monitors became our sacred objects and our hymns of praise. Tucked away in a small box I kept the tiny baby sized blood pressure cuff, the pads of the heart monitor and the thermometer we used to take his temperature eight times a day.

The NICU became our home. It also became our sanctuary; this was where we worshiped the presence of that divine spark, because we saw it in every baby and family that came into the NICU. We even worshiped it in those sweet babies that never made it home, whose families stayed in the wilderness for a long time. I don't envy those families, I'm not sure even the most fully developed wilderness skills could ease their pain and loss. Sometimes we just need time, time to allow ourselves to **JUST-BE-LOST** and time to find a new pathway—one foot in front of the other.

Interestingly I think about those times in the NICU often, especially when I feel like I am headed into the wilderness and I don't really want to go there. Getting lost changes us. "If someone asked us to pinpoint the times in our lives that changed us for the better—a lot of those times would be wilderness times."

Because something happens to you in those moments in the wilderness that doesn't happen to you when you're safe at home, following those well-worn paths, you wake up to life in a whole new way.

The extremity of the life in the NICU forced me to walk from moment to moment and to find the joy in every breath. It heightened my sense of awareness—as getting lost will do—so that I found great joy in the little moments—the funny little sunglasses he had to wear under the lights treating him for jaundice, the rise and fall of his chest, the way his whole body would relax during bath time in what looked like a little pink dish bucket.

This wilderness time also forced me to receive the hospitality of strangers. It was in that moment of life when I learned to say "yes" when people would ask me if I needed anything.

That hospitality came largely from this community, from many of you, whom I had only known for a few short months. What I realized was that I didn't really *need* anything in particular. I needed people. I needed to know I was not alone. And there you were, showing up with food, taking the baby on a walk so I could get some work done, sharing your parenting woes and wisdom. Showing up in ways I've seen you do for one another over and over again in the last ten years.

In many ways this job offered me a path out of the wilderness I was in at that time. A community of love who welcomed my new family and who eagerly supported the expansion of religious education. An outlet for creative ideas and play. A place of stillness and reflection where I could explore life's meaning and big questions—with your children. And let me tell you, they are some of the wisest (and funniest) people I know.

And now I am off to the wilderness yet again. This time by choice—another practice in getting lost perhaps, but with a clearer path ahead of me. My memories of this beloved community and all that we have created together have become the wilderness skills I will keep with me always. From peace rallies on the corner, to witnessing for immigration justice at Justice GA with 14 teenagers, to 1000 paper cranes, to ten years of faith statements from our 8th grade rites of passage classes.

Getting lost—*being* lost teaches us to surrender, to find power in the present moment, to know the place for the first time. It teaches us gratitude, to be thankful for all we have in a world where so many have so little and face wilderness times that stretch on and on for decades. Being lost teaches us reverence—that state of recognizing and naming the holy in our lives--reverence for the beauty and fragility of life.

And like most things in life that offer a glimpse of the sacred, we must practice. We must practice taking the road less travelled, going off the beaten path, exploring new places, embracing our aggressive adventurers to develop the skills to serve us when life throws us into the wilderness without asking first. Because in those moments we can summon the joy that often comes with those times when we did have a choice. We can summon the power of community to know we do not walk alone.

"I once was lost but now I'm found." The trick is knowing we will be found. That is amazing grace.

Blessed be.