

This morning's reading from the Hebrew Bible is well, to say the least, a little heavy. What a story, huh? This morning's reading is part of a larger story that I grew up with, probably a familiar tale to many of you. How many folks here this morning have heard the story of the Israelites exodus? Okay, well I'll give a brief synopsis for those listeners on the radio that can't vote with their hands. God saves the Israelites from the perils and strife of slavery in Egypt by casting plague after plague on the pharaoh until he finally relents. For those more familiar with the cinematic version, this is where Charlton Heston boldly proclaims, "Let my people go." There is a parting of the seas, chariots in the mud, the Israelites escape and then they all live happily ever after. Right?

Okay, not exactly. The Israelites get a little lost, well a lot lost, for forty days. Some teachings on the Torah even hold that Moses has a divine map, which he lost but he was too prideful to admit it. I won't make any jokes about stopping to ask for directions. I promise. I won't even mention Moses' likeness to my father on our family vacations.

So, after wandering for forty days, like children in an overheated car without any roadside bingo games, the Israelites start to moan. And complain. And groan. And

grumble. As you read the biblical account you can nearly hear the people begging God, “Are we there yet” as God threatens to turn this exodus around.

Finally God has enough. He turns on the people of Israel, telling them that their faithlessness and wickedness have cost them. The punishment? They will spend a year wandering in the desert for every day that they’ve complained. That’s 40 years!

Now I would guess, if you are like me, you may have many questions about this story. You may be wondering how for goodness sakes, where the Israelites lost in a desert roughly 100,000 kilometers in total area for 40 years with about 2 million people in this exodus? Didn’t they start to notice they had walked in a circle? Or perhaps you are wondering why God is so angry. Didn’t God know this was going to happen? Or perhaps you are asking yourself why we are listening to this story this morning at all?

While these are all questions that have plagued me, no pun intended, I would like to look at what kind of message the biblical writers were trying to convey about a spiritual life well lived. I refuse to believe this is just a story about a proverbial time-out for bad behavior. I think this passage is a far deeper message about finding oneself in the desert, a message I discovered as I traveled to New Mexico this past summer.

I spent this my summer working as a student chaplain at a hospital in Albuquerque. The program, clinical pastoral education is one of the requirements for

ordination as a Unitarian Universalist minister. And after this past summer, I am so very glad it is a requirement. There are clinical pastoral education programs or CPE as they're called across the country. I chose New Mexico for its culture and land. I wanted an experience that was different from my North Eastern roots and that is exactly what I found.

Within my first few weeks of living in Albuquerque I was clearly enamored by the landscape: breathtaking mountains that literally surround the city, sunsets that stretch out for miles, hot dry days and cool evenings that end in a blanket of stars and begin with breathtaking sunrises. And yet for its beauty the city and the surrounding foothills are extraordinarily raw and jagged, the soft grasses are few and far between, cacti sprout like weeds alongside the sidewalks, bugs look like miniature armored tanks and tumbleweed blows through the streets as the merciless sun beats down on the city. I was beginning to understand the punitive aspect to God's words to the Israelites. Wandering in the city without AC would be a punishment! I could imagine them wandering in that desert, the sun upon their backs as it bounced off the sand, glaring light in their eyes and hard ground upon their feet.

Despite the heat and sun though, I was thrilled when one of my classmates in my program asked if I would like to go hiking. I imagined climbing the slopes of the

Sandias, known as the watermelon mountains, for their color, I imagined ground squirrels at our feet and eagles above head. Being a native New Mexican I was sure my classmate knew the spots. She boasted all week about the wonderful trail she would take us on. As we pulled up to the trailhead that Saturday I became a little nervous. It was not exactly what I had envisioned. The land was flat, sandy, and rocky. There weren't any trees or source of shade. What kind of nature hike was this I wondered?

I am sure I sounded a bit like the Israelites in the desert, as I looked out across the landscape, skeptical of what lie ahead. Katherine, our guide, got out of the car. Our small band of chaplains dutifully followed. Two miles into the hike I was hot, sweaty, and in a foul mood. The closet thing to wildlife I had seen was a stink bug. It lifted its rear high in the air as if to greet me as I passed. I was about to ask how much further we had to go, and upon remembering the Israelites opted not to.

Then quite suddenly she looked back and with eyebrows raised and I expected a canyon around the bend or eagle's nest. But she simply asked us, "Okay are you ready? You all are okay with heading off the trail a bit right?"

She proudly looked off the path and said "let's just wander a bit, I am pretty sure I can find my way back."

Pretty sure? Travel off the trail? Off the trail?! There is a trail for a reason! I thought of Moses without his divine map.

Somehow ten minutes later I was off the trail; literally wandering in the desert.

And then a miracle occurred. Well the closest thing that my rational brain could acknowledge to a miracle. I stopped grumbling and as I wandered I found I wondered. I looked beneath a rock to discover a whole world of small ants building up their hill.

Beneath some shrub was a small lizard, proud of his natural cabana.

As I looked at the shape of this once unremarkable land, my soul opened. There was space here to let go of the moment and simply be in the moment. To stop doing and begin being. Here was the desert, and in looking into its nothingness, I found everything.

I thought of the David Grayson quote, “Adventure is not outside of a person, it is within.”

There were canyons in my soul. Unexplored mountains to climb, river bends, wild animals who were fierce and tough, eagles that soared with grace and even ground squirrels that scampered about nervously.

There was no dehydration hallucination. This was the simple experience of granting oneself the space to discover.

There looking out across the desert, into the vast void of sand and rock mixed with silt and earth I entered into the space finding the Divine staring right back at me. Staring at me in the rock that resisted gravity as it teetered upon another, staring back at me in the soft wind that would occasionally blow through the sands, starting back in the stink bug. Well maybe that is pushing it.

I do not believe it was the breathtaking beauty, because frankly the spot where I sat was better described as desolate than breathtaking. I don't believe it just to be the sheer amount of space, which is liberating and healing in its own right. I believe that divine grace transcended that moment because we dared to wander, to wonder, to seek.

I'm not trying to romanticize the experience here. Wandering off the path, leaving room for spiritual transformation is dusty, dirty, sweaty work. I admire folks who meditate in a peaceful room with tranquil sounds. I am not one of them.

I think desert spirituality is the call to the rugged seeker. And yet it doesn't have to even occur in a desert. A rugged seeker can make spiritual space out of any landscape in their willingness to wander off the path because the hard work of the seeker is bred from within.

As UUs we are pretty good at seeking. We are a self-professed community of seekers. While this can sometimes lead to a misunderstanding that UUs believe in anything, or nothing, to be a seeker does not mean one does not have faith. In truth, Unitarian Universalists are known for their theological diversity both as a denomination as well as individuals. Many UUs have converted more than once in their life, finding that spiritual truths and wisdom are not limited to a creed, church or coda. We are a congregation of worshipers who are willing to wander, to wonder, to seek. Ours is no caravan of despair. Come we say, come whoever you are.

Returning to the Israelites and their punishment of wandering. I think God actually gave them an opportunity, a chance to discover who they were: the chosen people of God. In wandering in the desert, they were transformed from a grumbling group of freed people who had no clear bond or covenant into a community of grace that covenanted in love, trust, and honor. That is the story. That is the message: know thyself.

The Israelites took the risk to wander and were able to find something new about themselves. It is that set of traditions, those ways of being, and that identity that have survived into one of the world's great religions.

Desert spirituality, or the way of the rugged seeker, is but one of many ways to know yourself. It was the way chosen by Edward Abbey, who we read this morning. Abbey, after a successful academic career and promising job offers went to Utah to work as a park ranger. He lived alone in a cabin and in doing so discovered himself to later become one of the world's preeminent ecologists. Abbey's story is often painted as a Thoreauian retreat into the wilderness, but in fact he records in *Desert Solitaire* all the many people who journeyed with him in that year from campers to cowboys. Abbey was far from alone.

This is an important piece to desert spirituality. It is tempting to imagine the rugged seeker as a lone ranger who departs to find the inner self. But even the highest example of this type of path, led by the Buddha himself, was not a lone ranger. Rugged seekers throughout the ages have had guides and companions on their travels.

And rugged seekers are not always hard, rough individuals either. In my work at the hospital this past summer I met many rugged seekers, most of them children. We each were assigned units and my units were the women and children's floor of the hospital. While it probably sounds depressing to spend your summer with sick children it was amazing! Kids have this rare ability to be in pain and upset one moment and be willing the next to play a new game, to imagine with you taking a trip to Disney World, or to talk about their favorite friend Harold who does not even exist! They are very good at wandering and wondering. I saw children heal very quickly in awful situations and while much of this I am sure is attributed to their physical resiliency, I think it was also because each day they took the opportunity to discover who they were.

I met one girl who had a degenerative spinal condition that probably would eventually lead to her death. While she had days where she was very depressed and upset, she had many more where she treated the day as an adventure in living! I remember making a prayer journal with her and asking her what she was going to pray for, what she would write inside the pages of the journal. I expected her to say a prayer for healing or for her parents, pretty typical requests. Instead she looked me square in the eye and said, I want to feel the breeze on my face and feel the sun on my back. Surprised I said, "But there is a playground just across the hall and we can take you there this afternoon. The breeze is nice and the sun is out today." She smiled, "I know." That afternoon like any rugged seeker, she sat in her wheelchair with the sun upon her back and the soft winds of her face. In her heart, I am sure she was wandering in the desert.

As UUs I believe one of our core values is to seek in community, to wander in the desert with our companions and keep reaching for a better self, a more just and beautiful world. The work begins within our heart and soul.

Tomorrow is Labor Day, a holiday that was established to give the “hard workers a day off.” While I will be tempted to unpack my boxes and organize my apartments, to run errands, and go to the store I am going to try to wander even for just a little while. Though my head and body are planted firmly in this city, I might just let my heart and soul wander in the desert a little bit longer. I hope you’ll join me there. I look forward to seeing you.

May it be so. Amen.