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The Spiritual Art of Getting Lost
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Getting lost is not an art form that we treasure, indeed we often avoid it all costs. We do not want to be lost, we are ashamed of being lost. Have you ever been driving with your partner and gotten lost and not only have they gone mad about being lost but you too have been indignant that they cannot find their way?

I heard a joke about being lost the other day. There was a service for a man who was homeless with no family or friends. The funeral was to be held at a cemetery way back in the country, and this man would be the first to be laid to rest there. As the preacher was not familiar with the backwoods area, he became lost; and being a typical man did not stop for directions.

He finally arrived an hour late and saw the backhoe and the crew, that was eating lunch, but the hearse was nowhere in sight. He apologized to the workers for his tardiness, and stepped to the side of the open grave, where he saw the vault lid already in place. He assured the workers he would not hold them up for long, but this was the proper thing to do.

The workers gathered around, still eating their lunch and he poured out his heart and soul. As he preached the workers began to say 'Amen,' 'Praise the Lord,' and 'Glory!' He preached, like he'd never preached before from Genesis all the way to Revelations. He closed the lengthy service with a prayer and walked to his car.

As he was opening the door, he overheard one of the workers saying to another, "I've never seen anything like that before, and I've been putting in septic tanks for twenty years."

Barbara Brown Taylor American Episcopal priest, professor, author and theologian. In one of her books, An Altar in the World writes has a chapter called, "The Practice of Getting Lost." She writes about times when our lives fall apart, when we get lost physically on the road and also in our lives through divorce, the selling of our homes, the breakdown of our careers, or the death of our loved ones that throw us into terrain that is unfamiliar. And though she says that she wishes us well in these times, that she does not wish us undue pain or suffering, she reminds us that "there is something holy in [these] moment[s] of knowing just how perishable you are. It is part of the truth about what it means to be human, however hard most of us work not to know that."¹

Her words challenge me. Does she mean that when I am broken open with something that frightens me and brings me the feeling of being lost that there is something holy there? Does she mean that when we are facing a divorce or even illness or all of the fears and losses of life that in them too the possibility of something holy is present? What is this holiness? Where is it? How can we touch it and bring it into our lives in a way that is true?

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, An Altar in World (New York, Harper One, 2009), 76.

Rebecca Solnit is an American writer who writes on a variety of subjects including the environment, politics, place, and art. In her book, [A Field Guide to Getting Lost](#)² she writes about the spiritual practice of getting lost. She begins by noting that lost has two disparate meanings: one is to lose something that is familiar and the other is about getting lost ourselves in which everything becomes unfamiliar. For Solnit, the art of getting lost is becoming a lost art and one we need to remain whole. For Solnit, if we lose our art of being lost, we lose ourselves.

Solnit goes on to point out that it is not so much about being lost as about trying to lose oneself, to surrender what we know about who we are and where we are so that we can see and feel and construct new possibilities around us. But how to do this? How do we surrender ourselves to something new when we know where we are, or think we do? How do we decide that we are lost when we think that everything and everyone is familiar, including ourselves?

Of course, tragedy, as I mentioned before, forces us into a type of surrender. But what about when we know that it is time to be lost, that it is time to reorient ourselves to the world and those around us and we are not in a time of tragedy to jolt us into surrender?

Meno, a pre-Socratic philosopher, writes, “How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?” Plato takes on Meno posthumously and decides that his question is answerable; that there are no real mysteries, that all can be known.

I have to disagree with Plato, not because I believe I know more than he did. I am sure I do not. But because I need to believe in mystery and the unknowable and more than both of those, I need to believe that pursuit of that which we cannot know is worthy of the journey.

How do we go about finding that which cannot be known? How do we go about becoming someone we are not yet? As Rebecca Solnit puts it, “The things we want are transformative...love, wisdom, grace, inspiration-how do you go about finding these things that are in some ways about extending the boundaries of the self into unknown territory, about becoming someone else?”³

In [The Altar in the World](#), Barbara Brown Taylor writes that there are many ways to find the other in ourselves and the world. One of the chapters in the book is titled, “The Practice of Getting Lost.”

Taylor, who lives on a farm and shares her space with a herd of cows, talks about the cow paths of our lives – the worn ways we have established for getting from here to there – and the value of stepping off those paths once in a while. She begins by speaking of quitting the literal cow paths on the land where she lives.

² Rebecca Solnit, [A Field Guide to Getting Lost](#) (New York, Penguin Books, 2005)

³ Solnit, 5.

Once you leave the cow path the unpredictable territory is full of life. True, you cannot always see where you are putting your feet. This means you can no longer afford to stay unconscious. You can no longer count on the beat-down red dirt path making all your choices for you. Leaving it, you make your own choices for a spell. You agree to become aware of every step you take, tuning all of your senses to exactly where you are and exactly what you are doing.

When I do this, I hear the buzzing of the yellow jackets in time to take a detour around their front door. I see the gap in the grass around the groundhog hole in time to step around it. I sing old Baptist hymns to warn the snakes that I am coming...What I see...is the tiny wild blue iris that grows close to the ground. I see the round bed in the tall grass where the doe sleeps with her twin fawns at night, and the hornet's nest no bigger than a fist, hanging from the underside of a thistle leaf.⁴

Brown Taylor then goes on to write about getting lost while driving as another way to wander off the cow paths of our lives and she drives into a neighborhood that she does not know. She stops at a corner market for instance and takes the time to go in and chat with people. How many times do we stop at the El Salvadoran market out on Old South and chat with folks? How many times do we try to get lost on the moors even here on our little island and so find new grasses and type of butterfly to marvel with? Who inside ourselves might we meet if we did so? Is this the opening to the holiness Brown Taylor speaks of, this touching of our vulnerability against the vulnerability of the world?

I remember after giving birth to my daughter in Germany and her father and my first husband started using drugs. My daughter was a month old when I decided to leave him. I came home to the States to live with my mother, who had just started therapy and al-anon and my father who had just quit drinking. They welcomed me with love. My mother had one condition: to live here, you have to start therapy. And so began my lifelong relationship with therapy!

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Even those who are ministered to by brave friends cannot shake the shame of getting lost in our lives. And yet, if someone asked us to pinpoint the times in our lives that changed us for the better, a lot of those times would be the wilderness times."⁵

Is it not so? I felt so much shame for being a single mother and living with my parents with my daughter and yet that time began an opening in me that to this day remains, one that points me toward self exploration in vulnerability, toward compassion in times that would name me or those I love with shame.

I have a friend who is a chaplain and she told me that she sees the face of God in everyone she meets in a large hospital where she works. It always strikes me listening to her that the holy is in every one of us and when we can risk the courage to recognize ourselves in each

⁴ Brown Taylor, 70, 71.

⁵ Brown Taylor, 78.

other, especially in the faces that we most want to shun and judge, our capacity to receive and be with the holy grows.

God, the longing for God that has existed throughout time, and is a longing at its root, I believe, for love, forgiveness, acceptance. This longing can be a bridge, not only to god for those that find god in their lives, but to each other, to each other's love, forgiveness, and acceptance. When we risk seeing all of who we are and have ever been or will become in each other, we open our hearts and minds wide enough to touch the holy longing of humanity: to be seen and still be worthy of love.

How much braver might we be to risk being lost then, come what may, knowing we are all but one of the many faces of the holy? I think this is what Barbara Brown Taylor meant about getting lost and the holiness that is available to us then. When we are most vulnerable, we are most human. And when we are most human, we are most available to ourselves and the world in our essence, which is holiness.

Edgar Allan Poe declared, "All experience, in matters of philosophical discovery, teaches us that, in such discovery, it is the unforeseen upon which we must calculate most largely."⁶ How can we calculate the unforeseen? Perhaps this has to do with the capacity, the willingness to leave a place in ourselves that is available to the unknowable, the mystery, the open door.

Gary and I leave for a 2 month sabbatical tomorrow to Nepal and India. We begin with a week conference of Unitarians and Universalists in Kathmandu and then on to a 21 day trek, just he and I and a guide, in the foothills of the Himalayas, staying in villagers' homes and visiting Buddhist monasteries and schools. And then the last 3 weeks we are on to Shillong, India in the Khasi Hills, in very Northern India, where 10,000 Indian Unitarians live. They will host us there and we will be working at an orphanage as well that cares for Unitarian boys and girls.

People have asked me, What is your goal for this sabbatical? Well, I hope to get lost, to surrender some of what I think I know about myself and others and discover something new, something precious, even sacred, that brings me back to the everyday sanctity of life. I wish to be awakened to the holy in all of life. Only a small goal. Thank you all for allowing me this time. Thank you.

Solnit tells a story about Passover in her family, the feast that celebrates the Jews flight out of Egypt and invites the prophet Elijah into the house. One leaves a place set for Elijah, pours him some wine, and leaves the door open for him to enter. In some versions of the story, Elijah will come to earth at the end of time and answer all the unanswerable questions.⁷

⁶ Quoted in Solnit, 5.

⁷ Solnit, 3.

Perhaps we have to learn to keep that door open still, to invite in the dark, to pour a glass of wine for someone who is not at the table yet but who might just come one day with answers to questions we have not yet learned to ask.

Amen.