

Get Out of Town (or the joy of traveling solo)

My Cincinnati grandmother, who loved bourbon, racehorses, baseball and Jesus, in that order, had a hankering for getting lost. When she came to visit us in Akron, we would pile into her Chevy and drive out into the country and get lost... for hours, deep lost. No maps, no phones, no way back except by following your nose and you couldn't start back until you had no idea where you were.

"Something wonderful happens," she would say, "when you get lost." And routinely, wonder did find us: we would find soda shops that served sky-high ice cream cones, fields of wild strawberries, abandoned farmhouses, antique stores with no names, and once a toy shop with no one in it but us.

Getting lost was her way of getting found.

No wonder she lived to be 100 -- even though she spent the last forty years without her husband or maybe that helped. No, they were good friends, but I never once heard her complain about her decades of solo flight.

Yes, indeed, something wonderful happens when you get out of Dodge. Count on it. The ballgame, the gardening, the craft project, the church social, the long list of chores will still be there when you return, but

the perfect wind may not find itself at your back again, any time soon, so you have to grab it when it comes up... and that's true whether your 9 or 90, whether all you have is a field behind your house or the 12,000 miles of the Pacific ocean.

My 91-year-old mother has always kept her own company well, even as a only child who went along to parties where there were no other children. When I was a boy, she told me as long as you have a good book, you'll always have a friend you can depend on.

Keeping your own company well is not something taught in school, in the workplace, or in a marriage. This skill comes slowly to us -- even, I imagine, for Unitarian Universalists. And many never acquire the taste for spending time alone. We don't like ourselves enough to light off for some hinterland, and yet inevitably each person will spend an enormous time alone. So, the question is: will you use this time alone to advance your own story, to take a leading role in your own play, to tear up a little turf so you can say you had some things to fix. Will the wilderness of your own soul show you how to sing your song?

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How many times have you heard, "I never really knew my father, my older sister, my mother, my uncle." And when hearing this, you think, "Ok,

that happens... life is filled with roadblocks even in families, and two people at the same table, related by blood, often remain strange and indifferent to one another, forever. It happens. Lots of good novels and plays use this siege as a triggering device to uncover some greater conflict.

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As submerging as a family siege can be, it's really a shame when someone gets out of this life and has no clue who they are. They remain strange, indifferent and unknown to their own soul right to the end. They don't really know where their pushes and pulls are. They don't know what they are capable of. They don't gain the clarity of thought that comes only from some remote stretch of road they forgot to put on a map. They can't really think for themselves. They never really GET OUT OF TOWN. They didn't know how to live and they don't know how to die.

I've always craved solitude and have enjoyed my own company and have never had a problem wandering around by myself. I guess it's partly because in my family constellation, I had three sisters and no brothers, and I would have sold them all to the circus for the price of three Marvel comics.

This craving of solitude is something well suited for the creative seeker in you, but it can play a valuable role for any of the characters you become. Why?

When you go off alone, you become a better listener. When you get lost and stop and ask directions, it behooves you to get those directions straight or you'll speed oodles of time going around in circles. In just this way, listening lies at the very heart of the spiritual life, and oddly enough the farther a field you go, the closer you come in contact with the élan vital that connects you to people, places, things and spirit... everywhere.

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In my early teens, I learned to sail a boat alone, and in my twenties, I lived out West where my brother-in-law, a former Outward Bound instructor, encouraged me to go out on solo wilderness treks. My first of many solos in the Rawah Wilderness was thrilling and terrifying and instantly I felt like I developed the ears of a chipmunk or a porcupine or something in between.

When you're in the woods or mountains alone, you develop a keen sense of hearing. Partly, this is a survival response, but it also reflects the need we all have to become more expansive and more immersed in the world beyond our little patch of ground.

More than anything else, traveling solo means stepping outside your comfort zone. Leaving behind loved ones, leaving behind your comfort foods, your own bed, all your little addictions and rituals. In my twenties, it

also meant driving my VW bug all over creation including (7) times across the entire country. The only state I've never be in is Alaska and you can bet I'll get there before it's all said and done. If you go far enough a field, you won't find all the things that bind you back home, but you'll find something else: CONNECTION WITH THE VITAL SPIRIT IN US ALL.

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Just this month, I took one of my best little solo trips ever. I returned to the islands of Lake Erie to research a novel that takes place during Prohibition. It's the story of a 13-year old year girl who watches her father get kidnapped at a Sunday dinner and because he is taken back to Canada, where the U.S. law will not follow, she alone decides to leave the comfort of all she knows and go after him.

On this trip, I saw a cousin, an old friend, but mostly I met strangers. What did I do on these islands? I asked questions. I listened. I rode a bicycle. I traveled on ferries. I rode on single-engine prop planes and sat next to pilots and asked them questions.

When you sharpen your powers of listening, a very curious thing happens: You enter into deep space within yourself that connects you with the greater space all around you. And then what often happens is something quite amazing: all sorts of doors open, all sorts of happy accidents come

your way, all sorts of little opportunities arise -- not always, but enough to know that your wayward path is one that rewards you for taking a few risks.

Here's how it works: The more you go inward and ask yourself what you're looking for, the more you can reach outward and find yourself in the throes of serendipity. Chance feels like design. Chaos turns to order.

Strangers sound like friends. Aloneness holds you like togetherness. The far away draws close at hand. No wonder so many songs, poems, movies, and novels are about the thrills, chills and kindnesses found only on the open road.

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Most of us are bombarded with information overload, but does it bring us closer to ourselves? We can be reached in too many different ways, night and day, but we all -- even teenagers -- know this truth: there's great value in not being reached, in being alone, in not taking a lap top or cell phone, in being out of touch so you can immerse yourself in this very old and submerging adventure called listening.

The questions that travelers ask are the very oldest ones we have...Where does this road lead...Where can I find a good meal for not much money... Does anyone live on that island anymore... Where do all the Baltimore Orioles come from... Can you tell me the best place to find

lodging... Where exactly did the last ship go down... Where does Margaret Atwood live on this island and would she talk with me if I brought her flowers and a chocolate cake.

Now, it's a great luxury (especially in these times) to go off by oneself and listen, but I would argue the joys of traveling solo are available to everyone no matter where one resides: in a hospital, in a car, in an office. And the secret to this travel (real or imaginary) is always the same: Ask a question and listen for the answer. DON'T TALK in between the Q & A.

An unmistakable trait of every seasoned traveler (and every great traveler in any field of endeavor) is the persistent awareness of how much more there is to know about everything. You stop learning and traveling when you stop asking questions and listening. Emerson put it this way: "The true artist has the planet for his pedestal; the adventurer, after years of strife, has nothing broader than his own shoes."

The reason why adults usually don't ask the most interesting questions is easy to surmise. We are taught early on to become experts, to know the answers, to become authority figures, but if you already know everything what's the point of putting on your shoes in the morning and venturing forth.

It was Henry David Thoreau who said, "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them."

My mother shared that quote with me when I was a child and she urged me to make sure to sing my own song whatever it was. I would argue that Thoreau is right because we're not comfortable with traveling solo, with spending time with own thoughts, as messy and unsettling as they can be.

We say that people die from one disease or another, but I believe people die from living a life with an unknown port of call and a unknown destination -- from not knowing who they are, how they got here, and where they want to go and from... not listening to their oldest, secret passions.

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Unknown origins were not suffered by the Transcendentalists including Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott) who layered themselves into the origins of the Unitarian church. Emerson writes in his essay *The American Scholar*: "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds ... A nation of men (and women I might add) will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men."

*Imagine, trusting in your intuition and divine messages more than headlines.

*Imagine, going off and getting reacquainted with your own thought

that's completely free of what everyone else is saying.

*Imagine, closing all the books and writing your own.

*Imagine, sitting by a pond to see what happens in some quiet way to capture the essence of a season.

*Imagine becoming your own expert in all matters that concern you.

*Imagine, loafing about and inviting your soul.

If you can imagine all that, then you're a respectable heir to Whitman/Thoreau/Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Louisa May Alcott -- and you're a feisty, fiercely independent soul in the American Transcendental and Unitarian tradition and you have a very good idea where you've been, why you're here and where you're going and you're not afraid to get out of town on your own.

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The movie, the Dead Poets Society leans on Transcendentalism for much of its staying power. As you may recall, the story of the movie takes place in 1959 at the Welton Academy, a private boys school where Tradition, Honor, Excellence and Discipline are revered. Any act of independent thinking is discouraged.

Mr. Keating (played by Robin Williams) teaches poetry at Welton Academy, but he doesn't follow the rules. He rips out the introduction of

their textbook, *Understanding Poetry* which describes how to rate the quality of a poem with a number. "Excrement" yells Keating and he encourages his students to rip this introduction out of their books and to call him, "O Captain, My Captain, after the title of the Whitman poem. He later has his students stand on their desks as a reminder to look at the look in a different way, just as Thoreau intended when he wrote, "The universe is wider than our views of it."

The rest of the movie is a process of awakening and a confrontation with authority. When the boys learn that Mr. Keating was a member of the school's old literary club, the Dead Poets Society, they aim to revive the Society. One of the boys, who wants to be an actor, tries out for a play but knows his father will disapprove. His father orders him to withdraw from the play, but the boy goes against the father's wishes and delivers a commanding performance.

Infuriated by this affront, the father plans to pull the son from the school and enroll him in a military school to prepare him for Harvard and a career in medicine. Unable to cope with the certain future that awaited him and equally unable to make his father understand his passion for acting, the boy takes his own life.

Keating is accused of inciting the boys to restart the Dead Poets

Society and is fired, even though the boys recreated the Society themselves. But as Keating leaves, the boys climb onto their desks and chant his name, "O Captain, My Captain."

The learning that takes place at the Welton academy comes a terrible price, but the boys have learned the universe is wider than their views of it. They learn to stand up for something they believe in. They've learned that if you think independently you might be regarded as dangerous, and yet, knowing what they now know, they have no other choice but to add passion to the list of things to be revered and protected within themselves.

Whether you're a teenager, in the middle of your life or near the end, this going off alone journey holds many secrets, surprises, perils and promises.

At 55, my father shaves his head, rips up his life insurance policies and we leave Ohio on the forty-foot sloop he built from scratch, cross the Erie Canal, down the Hudson river, past the Metropolitan Life Insurance tower,

and he never again casts anyone a safety net for the darkness waiting out the length of monthly premiums and actuary tables.

Whether you're young, somewhere in the nebulous middle, or near the end of your life, you can -- like my father -- embark on a bold journey that

others may find impossible to understand, but that you know to be true. You can turn off one message and entertain another. You can tell the pundits and experts to take a hike. You can find another way home. You can like Thoreau, "suck out all the marrow of life, cut a broad swath, shave close..."

The point is: you can't just say you're a free thinker, an independent cuss and stop there in the ways of self reliance. It's like practicing your scales. When you stop doing it, the next time is much harder until the rust gets in the way and you stop for good. You have to practice your singing... all your life.

So, why not get of town this summer, by yourself.

Know too many people? Consider a fake nose and glasses. Sing a cowboy song off key. Or turn the music up too loud. Pick some blackberries at the edge of town. Strike up a conversation with a stray dog. Look in an empty store window in a town so small it doesn't have a post office. Find a bass pond tucked behind cattails. Take a ferry ride to a little known island. Stumble into a Tex-Mex conjunto bar. Hop on a motorcycle. Saddle up the winter pasture horse. Push off on the river of no return. Your arteries might be hardening. Your feet might hurt. Your partner may have left with no warning on the night train. Your sense of

direction might be crummy. But that's no reason to keep your walking cane parked.

Please get lost, so you can get found. Take any one of the amazing 17 to 18 hours of light we have right now, and find some way to get way off the grid. Try not to remember how you got there.

"To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, and the true success is to labor," so wrote Robert Louis Stevenson, my first boyhood hero, who spent nearly all of his 44 years battling illness, yet managed to cover the globe with his travels, deep lost and listening all the way.

When you get out of town and far removed from all things familiar, you'll find yourself in the midst of something large, something that speaks to your soul in a language so utterly new and old, you might just have to change your life, cut your hair, suck all the marrow out of life.

Know thyself and to thine own self be true, my mother told me as a child as her mother had told her. I say, in the spirit of Tom McGrath...*Get out of town while the going is good.*

Just pack a duffel for one. A light lunch will do. You'll find food along the way. And music, friends, animals. And great drafts of space. The east and the west will belong to you. And the north and south will

embrace you. You will be larger than you thought and better than you thought. And you'll hold more goodness than you ever imagined.

If my Cincinnati grandmother, who drove her own 67 Chevy Impala until she 90, could get deep lost in the hills and farmlands of southern Ohio with no fear of bandits or flat tires, so can you, so can I, so can we all. In the spirit of my grandmother, Momo... let no song in you remain unsung.

(Benediction)

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,

Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road.
The earth that is sufficient,
I do not want the constellations any nearer,
I know they are very well where they are,
I know they suffice for those who belong to them.

