

## “The Grace of Detours”

A Reflection by  
Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull  
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden  
Meriden, CT

March 24, 2019

When he was a little boy, my brother had a stuffed dog named Detour. By the time I inherited him, it was hard to tell he was a dog. His ears were missing, his coat was haphazard, and he had been hugged and chewed and spun through the wringer beyond recognition. Detour had taken a series of detours from Dogdom! But Jeff had loved him, I loved him, and Detour was cute in a mangy sort of way.

With those of us who are human, or supposed to be, we can wander so far off course from what we casually call humanity that we end up beyond recognition—without the grace of that little stuffed animal. While our message this morning is about the grace of detours, we could as well speak of the gracelessness of detours, but this is the first Sunday of spring, so let’s stick with grace.

How many of you have run into a detour that has caused you to be later than you thought you might be in reaching your destination? [responses] As you were turning off course, how did you feel? [responses] Annoyed, impatient, frustrated perhaps. Think back to road trips when you headed to a place with which you weren’t completely familiar—northern Vermont, the Cape, coastal Maine, for example. If you were on vacation, your travel mode was more leisurely than usual. Let’s say you were driving; your spouse or friend, or maybe one of your kids was holding a map, letting you know how many miles to go before turning left. Or maybe you were following the GPS on your smartphone, and you thought your phone really was smart—so many features, even fool-proof directions. Uh-oh! Where are you? Did you miss a turn? Your map reader fell asleep on the job. Your GPS had a lower IQ than you thought. But here you are. How to get back on track? Or... how to be where you are, on another route, unintended. But look at those wildflowers. Check out that little ice cream shop. Stop here for your planned picnic on the shore of this unplanned pond.

Did you know there’s a magazine called *Detours*? I didn’t, until I took an online trip to its website—*Detours: An Explorer’s Guide to the Midwest*. We have some Midwesterners in this congregation, yes? I’m one of you, and I can vouch for the reality that Iowa and Illinois and Missouri are not just flatlands. Getting off the interstate, taking an extended break from the mind-numbing stretches that cross corporate farmland, holds surprises charming, majestic, and downright awesome. Ever been to Boone Ledges State Park? One of our members grew up in Boone and probably hiked and climbed these awesome cliffs, just south of town. The park even features a sandstone gorge that’s 100 feet deep. Would you believe you were in Iowa if you were one of the Northeasterners confusing my home state with Idaho or Ohio?

Then there's the Blues City Deli on the ground floor of a two-story brick building on an out-of-the-way corner in St. Louis. It's packed with visitors eager for the cuisine of New Orleans and the jazz native to that city and played with fervor in this Midwestern one. All you need are some well-planned detours.

Of course, you think, "the road untraveled"  
will be the path that's first unraveled,  
as today/this [morning] we explore,  
the haunting query: "Isn't there more?"

Curious you are—"What if's?" are rising  
over customs at risk, habits capsizing.  
Swim, row, trek, climb;  
Wear yourself out in search of sublime.

Try a different menu in an unfamiliar venue;  
Have a seat, feel the beat on an off-grid street.  
Amen to detours, for heartbeat suspended,  
grace there is in plans upended.

There are detours that can take us a few miles out of our way and then back to whatever the main road is. And there are unintentional detours that tell us we simply got lost. My friend Mary and I were part of a group of students on spring break from the American University of Beirut. We had taken a short flight across the eastern Mediterranean to the land of pyramids and ancient cities whose streets defy direction. After settling in, why not take a late afternoon walk beyond the confines of our western hotel? If West 4<sup>th</sup> Street crossing West 11<sup>th</sup> Street in the West Village of New York City befuddles the out-of-towner, Cairo's serpentine avenues spawning a labyrinth of pedestrian arteries befuddle the senses. Time for the call of the minaret, that sound that bids the faithful to prayer. It was our signal to head back to the hotel.

We were surrounded by the devout and then by women busily preparing for the evening meal. The sun was dipping. Mary and I were in the poorest of the poor neighborhoods of Cairo. We didn't have the sense to be frightened, but we were clueless about how to get "home". Not exactly fluent in Arabic, we spoke with our hands. People were friendly, but unable to guide us to where we needed to be. Then we spotted a French business—actually a casket shop, with its wares on full vertical display around the entrance. Mary spoke French. We entered, and the gentleman understood our plight immediately. Of course, he would see us back to our hotel. But first, we must have some coffee and pastries. Such is hospitality in the Mideast. We were hungry; we were ready to sit down. We were exemplars of dumb trust and the beneficiaries of the good grace of this gentleman to treat us to late afternoon refreshments before taking us to the door of our hotel.

Perhaps there should be a journal called *Detours: An Explorer's Guide to the Mideast*. Adventures guaranteed, but we also know such detours have landed a few travelers in dire straits. Mary and I gratefully settled for an adventure. Ours was a modest sojourn off the beaten path.

Surely the most iconic detour was the ten-year voyage of the mythical Odysseus, recounted by the 8<sup>th</sup> BCE poet, Homer, and rendered in myriad translations. Odysseus' journey was not simply a detour, but a long journey home from war in the intended direction of Ithaca and family. It's an epic journey, replete with detours—detours of diversion, seduction, entanglements, devastation, and epiphany after epiphany of what it took to stay “on course” in his seaborne saga. The very soul of Odysseus' journey lay in his off-course adventures, without which *The Odyssey* would not be an odyssey, but akin to a sailor's log in story form.

Consider that each of you here this morning is the prospective author of a likely unpublished odyssey—your own. How many of you, how many of us, have found our way to any destination in a straight line?

Twentieth-century poet Josephine Miles offers perspective:

“All our roads go nowhere.”  
 Maps are curled.  
 To keep the pavement definitely  
 On the world.

All our footsteps, set to make  
 Metric advance,  
 Lapse into arcs in deference  
 To circumstance.

All our journeys nearing Space  
 Skirt it with care,  
 Shying at the distances  
 Present in air.

Blithely travel-stained and worn,  
 Erect and sure,  
 All our travelers go forth,  
 Making down the roads of Earth  
 Endless detour.

Miles' notion of “endless detour” may be reductionist, for she describes the totality of a life journey with no direction at all. “All our roads go nowhere.” Do we ever “arrive”—at a destination geographic or social or spiritual? By the very nature of this earth and the course of our day-to-days, are we, with straightforward intentions, repeatedly lapsing “into arcs in deference to circumstance.” Is this desirable or otherwise or just the way it is? Does human destiny lie in happenstance?

I am not one who adheres to fate and certainly not pre-ordained destiny. As we move through our life-course, we have some choices, no matter how mind-bending and soul stretching those choices might be. Most of us here this morning have lived long enough to know loss, illness, conflict in our relationships with people we love or try to love, and perhaps even the

ultimate strife that is war. Did we count on these circumstances? Did we count on the illness and death of a loved one, on a particular diagnosis we have received, on a marriage gone awry, on estrangement from a child, on impairment of one of our senses, on the devastation of a 9/11, on the brutality of war and the horrors that come with it?

Going off the beaten track is NOT always a welcome trip. It's easy to say that suffering makes us stronger when we're not suffering. Yet we can find grace in such unanticipated direction—grace as unearned and often unanticipated resilience, grace as wisdom gained that could not be gained in any other way, grace as empathy cultivated through vulnerability, and grace blossoming into gratitude.

Detour as hurt can be transformative, as Glenn Currier concludes in “Wall of Hurt”, the poem that I shared earlier:

...I am amazed  
 but I know not why (knowing me)  
 how hurt can remake  
 and occasion my transformation,  
 how the bad can become the good  
 If I am patient enough  
 and work hard enough  
 to find  
 or make  
 cracks in that wall.

We are each on a path, not a pre-ordained path, but a path with choices presented when we least expect them. What woman expects to receive a diagnosis of breast cancer? Yet I know that a few of us here this morning have at one time received such a diagnosis and are, by our presence here, obviously survivors. Such was the circumstance of Portia Nelson that inspired “Autobiography in Five Chapters,” which we heard just moments ago. There was “a hole in her sidewalk”. She falls in; it takes a long time to crawl out. She repeats her walk down the same street, denying that it's there, falls in again; it takes a long time to crawl out. This goes on, until...she walks down a different street.

What is the hole in your sidewalk? It need not be a catastrophic hole. It need not be a disaster in the making. It might be a small hole, a habit, a pattern to which you have grown so accustomed that your path lacks vitality. The holes in our sidewalks assume countless guises. The sidewalks surrounding those holes take many forms. The streets running parallel to those sidewalks make up a network of streets. When those holes claim us, for whatever chapters of our lives they might, how do we find meaning in what we experience? When we all but befriend those holes and count on rescue after rescue, how can we find meaning? How, when all the signs are there, do we tap the wisdom of experience so that we take a different course?

“Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?” It's a mystery, yes?

As we diverge again and again from the path we think we're on, may we know experiences of adventure and delight, may we know resilience, may we meet strangers who become friends, may we cultivate deeper empathy, and may we find all possible grace in the unanticipated epiphanies of new ground.

And may I hold in fond remembrance a little stuffed dog whose weathered form gave full credibility to his name—Detour.

So may it be and Amen.

**Sources:**

Jan Carlsson-Bull, "The Path Unraveled", May, 2016.

Glenn Currier, "Wall of Hurt", August 2018.

*Detours Magazine: An Explorer's Guide to the Midwest*, <http://tmn.truman.edu/detours/detours-magazine/>.

Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken" in *Mountain Interval*, 1916.

Josephine Miles, "On Inhabiting an Orange" from *Collected Poems*, University of Illinois Press, 1983.

Portia Nelson, "Autobiography in Five Chapters" quoted in Charles L. Whitfield, M.D., *Healing the Child Within*, Orlando, FL, Health Communications, 1989 (further quoted in Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan book of Living and Dying*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, 31-32.

"Where Do We Come From?" Words: Paul Gaugin and Brian Tate; Music: Brian Tate, in *Singing the Journey*, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 2005, 1003.