

Breaking Trail on a Spiritual Path

I've spent time over the last couple of months working on a presentation about my goals for spiritual practice now that I'm retired. It was going to be about establishing daily activities I thought were important, but somehow I never got around to them. The Bengali poet Tagore described my problem this way:

The song I have come to sing
remains unsung to this day.
I have spent my life
Stringing and unstringing my instrument.

That pretty much summed up my dilemma. Retirement was my chance to become more self-directed. I grew up in a household where someone else was always in charge. I learned to be reactive rather than proactive. My fear is that, on my deathbed, my regrets will be lopsided—I'll have more regrets about errors of omission—missed opportunities—than errors of commission. I'd just add here that certain alleged sins of commission would have occurred prior to my marriage in 1974. Had these alleged events occurred, they would have predated the nightmare of social networking, thus leaving no trail of evidence and would be merely hearsay. Essentially, it's my word against nobody's.

So here I was, retired, with some amount of time in front of me. It was time to do some trail breaking, rather than falling to my usual place at the back of the pack. Alpha female here I come! I would create and conduct a plan of a daily spiritual practice so I'd have some real-life experience to draw on for my talk in mid-February. What I came up with looked strangely familiar. It was my perennial list of New Year's resolutions: daily exercise, meditation and writing. It sounded a little lame, but maybe I could spin the trail-breaking angle about autonomy and I'd have something meaningful. The weeks passed. Was this a spiritual issue? Did it matter? I focused on the writing piece, but then the question. Was it spiritual? What made me think I could do it? How much encouragement from others would it take to get me off the dime so I'd just do it every day? That spoke loudly about my problem with initiative, but not in a positive sense. Was there any benefit to writing as a private activity? I veered off into the old mire about writing being a self-indulgent vanity. What was the point? One of my searches online brought up 785 million sites about writing. Perhaps it was a more spiritual act to refrain from writing and spare humanity the extra words.

And then, life happened. My talk was put on hold. As you may know, my mother had a stroke a couple of weeks ago. A few days later she passed away at the age of 98, a gentle closing to a good life. I spent the next week in Wichita with my brother and sister attending to the final activities. This was the first time ever just the three of us were together for any length of time. We've gotten together with spouses, kids, or to connect during a visit with Mom, but this was the beginning of something different. Our lives have unfolded in different parts of the US and in very different

directions, and we have little in common now that both parents are gone. The last time all three of us lived in the same state was 1970.

My brother was the first child. To give you an idea of the importance of gender and birth order in my family, consider the fact that he was named Rex (Latin for king, mighty counselor, ruler). My sister was born 3 years later and the family was complete. Two children, a boy and a girl, just as they'd planned. Then I showed up two years after that, the result of a spontaneous act in an otherwise carefully managed married life. My sister and I were also given names....

But back to Wichita. My brother was the Executor of the estate. My sister was a signatory on accounts, since she was the only one of us who lived locally. I have never been involved in any of that. I had only a vague notion that there was some money in Mom's Trust but never assumed there would be anything left over. When Rex told me there would be an equal division of funds, I was surprised. It was not a vast fortune, but enough to think about and far more than I imagined. But wait, what was fair? The Trust and Will were set up decades ago, before our life trajectories were well under way. Was dividing the estate into thirds the right thing to do at this point in time? We were all retired, but one of us had considerable economic success; the other two of us had less lucrative career paths, and had different living situations. One of us had remained single and had a number of significant health events that had compromised everything, resulting in more needs than resources.

I brought up the basic question to Rex. What about redistributing the inheritance based on current circumstance? Rex actually listened to me and thought it was a good idea to explore this. He had expected that we'd need to have financial involvement eventually, but he apparently hadn't thought about attacking the problem with the Estate money. I was stunned. In my family, the ideas rolled down from the men, who were in charge. As the youngest, it seemed that if I tried to fly an idea up the chain, it was dismissed. If it had been a good idea, it would already have thought of it. The best I could expect was an explanation about why my idea wasn't so good. I soon learned to save my lips all that work. Maybe I stopped too soon. In Wichita, at least for me, the ground shifted. I would have a new role. We'd now be coming to Wichita to meet with the focus on my sister and her needs. We were co-Executors, essentially. I had to think about this new information. I was breaking trail. No longer was I the naïve kid trailing behind by five years.

As siblings, disposing of the last of Mom's belongings had some rough patches. In our grief, our differences and old rivalries chafed at times. When I lose my patience, and my tongue, especially in that context, I feel deep remorse. When we said goodbye and headed to the airport I was emotionally and physically worn out. It had been a long week. Now as I waited for my flight I would have to use the time to finish up my talk. Boy, was it stale now! Not just stale—it was lame!

And then I saw it as if for the first time: the gift shop with its full complement of souvenirs from the Wizard of Oz. You can choose Ruby Slipper salt and pepper shakers, or a globe containing the glittering towers of Emerald City. My favorite is a note from Toto to Dorothy, emblazoned on bright red t-shirts and coffee mugs:

Dear Dorothy,

Hate Oz.

Took the shoes.

Find your own way home.

Toto

My talk fell into place, and here's what struck me.

Hate Oz. What is Oz? The smug disdain and selfishness of the 1%. Our culture of consumption and selfishness that endorses gambling as a state revenue stream. The cult of celebrity and beauty, greed, artifice, short-term gratification, hype, spin, the phony warmth of the hosts on the Home Shopping Network.

Or maybe Oz is the promise of heaven—the eternal life, that other life that brings me no comfort and seems to drain the attention that should be invested in this world.

What about Toto's second statement? **Took the shoes.** The Ruby Slippers. All Dorothy had to do was click the heels together 3 times and she'd be whisked back home to Kansas. The shoes were like the Monopoly cards that let you "get out of jail free" or "pass go, collect \$200." They are the magic wand, the key to the Kingdom, the answer to our prayers, our salvation, the magic potion.

Shoes are the primary resource. Maybe shoes are the inheritance, a tool to soften some of Life's inequities. Did Toto have a right to take the shoes? Did he need them more? After all, he didn't have the help of the Scarecrow, the Lion and the Tin Man. Or was he just a "dirty dog" of a thief?

Aren't we all, in the industrialized world, in this political age, taking the shoes? We're hogging more than our share, leaving the rest of history to clean up the mess, salvage the squandered resources, pay the bills?

And Toto's final words. **Find your own way home.** In a sense, that's that mantra of the 1%. I've got mine; I'm not responsible for you. We've devolved into a society that is less and less willing to recognize our common good, abandoned the idea that a good decision is one that does the most good for the greatest number of people, and it's everyone for him/herself (but the deck is stacked toward those with the most financial clout).

On the other hand, **Find your own way home** describes the journey we've quite deliberately chosen as Unitarians. The Fourth Principle: the free and responsible search for meaning." Our faith, and this principle, is all about defining home and the path that has meaning for us. We accept life without guarantees, the fact that there is no wizard, no promise of Oz. We believe that each of us is looking for something authentic to guide us "home." What is home? Is it the end of our life? Is it understanding the mystery of life? Is it conducting our own journey? Which way is it? How do we get there? There are no Ruby Slippers to transport us. We are on our own, but we're not alone.

Even though Dorothy discovered the Wizard was a phony, she did find help on her journey. She got a little help from Glinda, the kind witch from the North, but her steadfast companions, all the way to Oz and back, were the Tin Man, the Lion and the Scarecrow. Out of their steadfastness, they faced their worst fears. In the process, the Tin Man discovered he had a heart. Of course, this part of the story is about love and compassion. That's about showing up when someone is in need, even when that person can't always respond with the gratitude we might expect. The Tin Man's character reminds me to "show a little tenderness," as Paul Simon said. The Scarecrow's discovery was that he had a brain. I could relate to him last week. I discovered that although my brother is a good and intelligent man, he welcomes input in his life-long role as the responsible party. He doesn't have to journey alone, either, because I can participate. He's been the responsible Executor, but he doesn't see every part of the picture. I have wisdom to share that may not be accessible from his vantage. My brain is quite different from his. We both have limitations, but our combined view can provide us a wider perspective.

Last, the Cowardly Lion—I've walked in his shoes, too. I am not very steady in my voice or my opinion. When I learned years ago not to bother to propose an idea, I was young and didn't understand that someday I would shed the limitations of a childish perspective. By assuming my input was not important, I concluded that I didn't have any. I didn't consider that it might change with time—that I might catch up. In that way, I have abdicated my responsibility. I let other people take charge, not deliberately passive, but failing to recognize that I could take on a useful role. I am finding that it takes some courage to put myself on the line. Sometimes it takes courage to show up, voice your opinion, and most of all, to face another's pain. It's easier to stay away and let someone else do it. But I am needed; I can help break trail. Dorothy's Ruby Slippers turned out to be less important than she expected they would be. Her companions provided the help she needed.

Dorothy's story serves to remind me that our long journey home will demand our compassion, the reason gleaned from our experience, and the courage to participate. We can't take someone else's journey for them, but we can walk along with them even if it's just part-time. Even if there was a time I could stand at the back of the room and never expect to be called upon, I know now that I need to step forward and take on my share of a number of responsibilities. If I don't, I'm letting people down, including myself.

What I started to write about two months ago was my intention to practice fully inhabiting my “space” on this earth—being fully present in the moment. My goal was to live authentically, fully expressing my unique voice and making the unique contribution only I can make. Recent life events underscored the importance of this goal, and how spiritually challenging it can be. They gave me a clear vision of why it matters. Do I need to be more self-directed? Yes, it makes a difference, and I have a responsibility. Do I need to meditate? Yes, in order to know more clearly what the issues are—to separate out the chaff from the grain. Do I need to write? Yes. Does it have a purpose? Is it worthwhile? Yes—because that is how I pay more careful attention to the grains of ideas that come and go. If my thoughts are unformed, I am uninformed. My thoughtful, active participation in some small parts of the world is important. To my sister, to my brother and to my immediate family, I matter. My full presence and participation makes a difference, not in a grandiose way, but I am certainly solid enough to take my turn breaking trail, and I might even influence the route we take.

When I think, and write, and clarify, it helps do one more thing. It allows me to share my formulated ideas with fellow seekers of home. I need to say it out loud to people whose journey I share, people I respect. Each of us has been given different resources for our journey, different perspectives, opportunities, and choices. But we’re all finding our way home, and sometimes we can share the effort of trail breaking. When we can, one of us will be in the lead and another will fall back to rest. Maybe at that point in the journey one of us can see more clearly, or one of us has more strength. We can make it a little easier for others.

In this tale that involves my siblings, it’s important for me to remember that we started on the journey from the same home. That bonds us to each other for the entire route, like it or not. As I’ve written drafts of this talk, I’ve thought, written, and spoken—living my spiritual journey. I am learning as I go to assertively inhabit this life I’ve been given. As my mother said, if I had never been conceived in that brief moment of spontaneity, everything would have been different. I intend to live the gift of life that I was given, and to follow several potential trails that stretch out ahead of me.

In closing, I’ll share some revisions I’ve made to Toto’s letter:

Dear Dorothy,

Still hate Oz.

Took the shoes. Let me know when you need them.

Find your own way home. I’ll be up ahead, taking my turn breaking trail.

Oh, and I’ll write.

Toto