“Spinning Towards North”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/.

My partner and I generally agree that I have the better sense of direction. When preparing for a road trip, I am usually the one who will map out the route. I pride myself on not needing to use GPS when heading home from familiar places, or even from somewhere I have been only once or twice. I believe greatly in the strength of my inner compass.

I credit the development of this strong sense of direction to having been born and raised in the city of Chicago. With the lake positioned always to the East and streets that pointed directly north and south, east and west, I felt well-trained in directional orientation from an early age.

Things got more complicated when I moved to Boston as a young adult. I soon learned that the orientation of the paved streets followed no rhyme or reason having been laid on top of the trodden paths of cow’s hooves. In Washington, DC, the nearly grid-like system of the city’s streets was more familiar but that city threw in roundabout after roundabout and streets pointed northwest and southeast in addition to the traditional cardinal directions.

Roman Krznaric writes about our human senses and makes the case that we have well beyond the commonly accepted five “outer” senses of sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste. He claims that directional orientation is also one of our senses, an inner sense. This sense called magnetoreceptivity is weaker in humans than in other species, but it has been detected. It is tied to the presence of a tiny crystal of magnetite in the ethmoid bone between our eyes and behind the nose. Humans, it seems, can also have a magnetic pull to the earth that helps with spatial and directional orientation.

After my partner and I had been dating for a while and he started to show me around the places of his childhood, I figured out that we had really just grown up with different

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ways of orienting ourselves to place. He knew that the way to get to the place where the falcons nest on the cliffs is to pass his childhood home and the Whippi-Dip, take a right at the underpass, and then take the trail that sits along the interstate. Or, he knew that his dad's house was several miles up from the I-91 exit, past Montie's shop and two big turns in the road mirroring the bends in the river, and a left at the general store.

Growing up in a rural environment, he had learned to orient himself to nature's landmarks just as much as, if not more so, to human made streets and structures.

The earth has indeed provided a way for us, humans, to know where we are. We can tune ourselves into the particular way a place smells and sounds and looks. This orientation to the earth provides both a practical, material necessity for survival and also a necessity of emotional health and well-being.

There is a short walk that I like to go on in Hubbard Park near our home here in Montpelier. The path has become familiar over the eight-plus years we have now lived here. Of course, there are seasonal changes. In the wintertime, the path is wide and open - dried out grasses and milkweed line the entrance and the branches of birch trees and maples are bare, allowing sunlight to enter the usually dense forest. By late July, though, one has to look carefully to find the step onto the wooden bridge and then wade past the lush green wetlands and into the forest.

I walked this path recently, just after the Christmas storm that brought 50 to 70 mile per hour winds from the east into our valley and up onto the surrounding hills. As I entered the forest, I had to stop and reorient myself. A massive pine tree was now laid flat against the forest floor. Its shallow roots blocking the walking trail. Just beyond it, another pine tree lay toppled to the ground. I kept walking taking in the aftermath of the storm as I climbed the hill. Branches were scattered about. Trees were lopped off at strange heights.

On the eastern side, one section of the park was barely recognizable. The strong winds had pushed down several large trees clearing that section of forest to open up eerily to the sky. To continue on the path, I had to cling to the upturned roots and find my footing on the newly trodden path. I passed the handmade bench where we had sat with our then four year-old his legs swinging beneath him as we gazed down at the steep

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cliffside. Continuing on, the forest was oddly quiet. That full kind of quiet after something significant has happened.

I then came to the place where I have come many times before to lay the full length of my back body upon the trunk of a tree and feel held. A new tree laid on the ground. The fresh smell of newly exposed fibers and crushed pine needles still hung in the air.

In the hushed forest of toppled trees and broken branches, I tried to find my center once again. It felt as if my inner compass was spinning in all directions.

So much around us is changing all the time these days. The seasons don't behave the way we're used to (although thank goodness for this recent snowfall). The local ecosystems we inhabit are shifting with the changing climate in ways both imperceptible at times but then violently apparent the next moment.

We are confronted with violent acts day after day that test our faith in one another - in ballrooms and classrooms, places of work and worship, and otherwise quiet neighborhood streets.

Our orientation to the natural world as well as to one another has become clouded and confused. Finding our center has become both more difficult and also more urgent.

In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, the Quaker activist and educator Parker Palmer reflects on the ways we are pulled away from ourselves and how it is we find our way back. He writes:

"There was a time when farmers on the Great Plains, at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door of their house out to the barn. They all knew stories of people who had wandered off and been frozen to death, having lost sight of home in a whiteout while still in their own backyards.

Today we live in a blizzard of another sort. It swirls around us as economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, and their inevitable outcome, war. It swirls within us as fear and frenzy, greed and deceit, and indifference to the suffering of others…

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The lost ones come from every walk of life: clergy and corporate executives, politicians and people on the street, celebrities and schoolchildren. Some of us fear that we, or those we love, will become lost in the storm. Some of us are lost at this moment and are trying to find our way home."

We are trying to find our way home. We are trying to find our way back to center, back to our own souls.

Whether it is out in nature or more metaphorically on the journey of life, feeling lost and disoriented is deeply uncomfortable and often troubling. And, it is often in these moments that we are reminded of what is most important.

Despite the sadness I felt walking through the forest that day, I also felt more connected. It became clearer to me how important my own relationship with the earth is and also how painful I find it that our human action, and inaction, continues to lead to an escalating climate crisis that threatens the very web of life that I love and depend upon.

This pain led me back to love and back to a sense of commitment to not settle for my own complacency or for collective inaction when it comes to fighting for the flourishing of life on this planet.

Reorientation has become a necessary spiritual practice in these dizzying times. Individually and collectively we need to find ways of noticing when we are lost and finding our way back again.

Parker Palmer writes: "My own experience of the blizzard, which includes getting lost in it more often than I like to admit, tells me that…the soul's order can never be destroyed. It may be obscured by the whiteout. We may forget, or deny, that its guidance is close at hand. And yet we are still in the soul's backyard, with chance after chance to regain our bearings."

Despite how lost we might feel, there is still the chance of regaining our sense of direction. There is something within each of us that can root us back to the wisdom of the ancestors, the wisdom of the earth, and our own inner wisdom.

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As Karen Hering writes: “We all have spiritual compasses inside us that help us to arrive at our own answers. Sometimes we can read our compasses more easily than others, but we all have something that spins towards north, an inner tug toward the holy.”

Have you felt this inner tug before?

I felt it in the woods on that walk earlier this month. I felt it two Sundays ago when one of our children sat on this chancel and wondered aloud why there was laughter as she spoke and I knew I needed to assure her that the adults in this room were very interested in what she had to say. I felt the inner tug sitting with a group of organizers with the Poor People’s Campaign as we contemplated the ending of emergency housing assistance and SNAP benefits and the Medicare cut-offs that will be coming in just a couple of months and what that will mean for poor and low-income families and individuals in our communities.

This tug towards north is our inner wisdom guiding us onto the path. Spiritual reorientation starts with this orientation to self.

And, when this tug is harder to feel within us, we can attune ourselves outwards for re-orientation. We can orient towards others. We can notice when and how we are drawn towards goodness and flourishing as it is shown to us in relationship with others.

In this way, we grab hold of the rope. We read our compasses and find our way.

I experienced a “finding our way” moment this past Friday morning in a place and at a time I was not expecting to experience such a moment.

I had just finished offering a devotional before the house chamber of our legislature, and immediately following the devotional it was announced that a member of the house was resigning their seat that very day for personal health reasons. This member’s resignation letter was read aloud. It poignantly described the member’s struggle with the decision as well as their great appreciation for their time in public office and the chance to serve the people of Vermont. The letter described challenging moments with colleagues as well as purposeful and gratifying moments. This representative’s love and commitment was so palpable in their words that it brought tears to my eyes. When the

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letter was finished being read, those present rose to their feet and delivered a standing ovation.

Now, I had no knowledge of this member's political views or their particular relationships with other members of that chamber. What was undeniable in the moment was the shared appreciation for one another's humanity.

I could feel all of us in that room pulled towards something both within us and beyond us held by an abundance of vulnerability, compassion, and grace.

It is not always clear where we are headed. Many of the signs we see indicate that we aren't always headed in the right direction. And yet, there is a compass within us leading us back to our inner selves, to one another, and to the holy.

Let us notice the pull within each of us toward the center of our hearts and spirits, the center that leads with integrity and with love, that draws us towards kindness and compassion, and that pulls us closer to the web of life.

May we keep on spinning towards north together.

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