

In my last sermon, in the fall, I argued that worlds of meaning—human worlds—are built through stories and through metaphors that spring from and entail stories.

Many metaphors are so deep in our culture/language/vocabulary that we do not sense them as metaphorical; journey once meant a trip from one geographic location to another at some distance, but here and now it seems more commonly used to mean a passage toward some life goal, such as wealth, or our passage through our “cancer journey,”—or through life as a whole. If life is *not* really a journey from point A to point B on a map, then this means only that life’s being a journey is true in some more profound sense.

Journey, paths, pilgrimages: The notion of a spiritual path, which may or may not involve walking along an actual pilgrimage route through the mountains or desert, is found around the world, in innumerable cultures. That pathway that pilgrims take is called the pilgrim’s WAY.

Perhaps it is natural *to us*; it is the WAY some of us are, naturally: we are beings who make sense of our lives by seeing them as quests/journeys/adventures/pilgrimages. If the “way” is natural in humans, in this sense, then in some sense everything has its own way: everything has its own particular trajectory, its own story-arc, through time. Everything goes naturally on its way, like water finding its own path down a mountainside.

And yet: To say it like this gives the idea that there is a stable thing, or fixed person, a soul, say SOUL X, and that this entity Soul X goes on a special fieldtrip through time and space. But really things and souls are just what we call particular

streams, certain flowings through time. To speak of Guy is to make a *verbal photograph*, a conceptual snapshot, a rough map that *usefully misrepresents this, what is happening here*—this flowing along that is unfolding each instant. These changes, and these, and these—they are not happening to some ME that stands apart from them, goes through them, is subject to them. I *am* these changes; when I say “I,” it is in reference to this flow.

In Chinese culture, this idea is expressed with the word Dao, which means “Way.” Dao has many meanings, but the two most important ones are: (1) the actual way the world is at the deepest level, flowing out into vast, variegated multiplicity and back again; and (2) the manner, or way, in which humans may live so as to harmonize their lives with the fundamental way things are. This latter can be thought of as a spiritual path. Or it can just be: *how to live life*.

Let's consider some teaching, especially from China and Japan, about the way.
First:

The way that can be named is not the true way.

This is the opening line of one of the oldest texts we have from China, the *Daodejing*.

There are many interpretations of it. Here is another translation of the same line:

The path one can follow is not the real path.

Later some wise-guy philosophers followed up on this idea by claiming that the very best Daoist was actually Confucius because Confucius did not even try to talk about the Way that cannot be expressed; he would not speak about ghosts or spirits or the afterlife

or weird happenings. He only gave practical, moral advice about *how to live a fully human life*. As Wittgenstein later put it, "Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent."

Of course we do HAVE to give out names and make practical use of categories, recipes, and maps. There is no other way for us to live as human. We will inevitably tell stories, create categories, ascribe identities and roles to ourselves and what is around us. We take mental snapshots and form constructs and then dream about how these made-up things relate to another. And yet, at the same time we know—and there is a liberating power in remembering—that these are *just* stories, these names are *ascribed*; our best maps of things are never this actual flowing just as it goes.

One of my students recently wrote, "You embody the path. The path is your life and all of the hits it gives you. Once you understand that there will never be directions through or to the path, the way becomes clearer and *it seems to flow through you*." So the starting point for all talk about the Way in East Asia is this recognition that it cannot actually be spoken of and it cannot actually be followed. Just as the shape you can put on a map is never going to be the real shape of Michigan. And any God you can imagine is, by necessity, a false idol.

How, then, would we know/share/imagine/teach/explain/point out the Way if, as soon as we start to do so, we are already in some sense lying, deceiving even ourselves? We have to have *a manner of embodying that to which we would point*. But: how would we do that?

#2

To study the way is to study the self;

To study the self is to forget the self;

To forget the self is to be awakened by everything.

—Dogen

This is how one great Zen master put it. Who am I? How should I live? These are fundamental human questions. Other animals don't seem to ask them; to ask them is our way as humans. *Asking them deeply can lead to openings, or insights, where our hearts bloom into fearless care.*

Another Zen teacher, Dongshan, was asked: "Is there a way for a person to live?" and he replied: "When you become a real person, there will be." This is SO frustrating to the earnest seeker of wisdom. But the teacher's apparent refusal, turning the student back on herself, is an unusual and very deep kind of help.

This is because the way to live is not captured in any guidebook; it is practiced improvisation built over the chord structure of our genes and traditions and life circumstances. If we pay attention, attuning ourselves patiently, we become *some sort of person*—at home in the world and our skin. And working with whatever we have, whatever our culture and talents afford us, we present this person to the world awakened by everything, which means— *as an activity of the world*. If we have a voice we sing out; if we have pots and pans, we bang.

A Japanese poet, Issa Kobayashi, evoked this notion in a haiku:

The man pulling radishes
pointed my way
with a radish.

We imagine Issa walking along the path, asking directions from a farmer---and the farmer, radish ready in hand, pointing out direction. OR, maybe the farmer was chatting with another farmer, and saw Issa going by and pointed right directly *at him*. THERE he is; *there* you are. And these two readings cast light on one another: After all, where is Issa really trying to go? Where are we really going on our so-called journeys and pilgrimages? Finally, we are headed to the truth of this very moment. And the farmer shows him, using what he's got. Each of us takes what is at hand, what is in hand right now, including our headaches and stress, even our greatest griefs, each perfect in its imperfection—and we use it as best we can.

That is how we can understand a long tradition of what otherwise might seem cryptic expression in East Asia. Car-pooling and grocery shopping, working at the shelter and running committee meetings: these are pilgrimage routes, marked out by those who came before. 20th cent Japanese poet Santoka writes:

This is the stone

Drenched with rain

That points the way.

In Japan, even and perhaps especially today when it is so much safer and easier, people go on long pilgrimage treks through the mountains, along the coastline, on traditional routes. The pilgrim keeps a sharp eye for the stone trail-markers, walking for miles through the rain, not wanting to go astray. Struggling to get to the next inn before nightfall. The rain, falling naturally, is perhaps the tradition of words and gestures and

silence to point out what cannot be spoken. This rain is the spirit of our life; it is our lifeblood.

And what is "*this*" in the poem? What *is* the stone wet with rain that marks the way, that indicates how we flow through time in a way that cannot be expressed and cannot be stopped? It is just and exactly all of this, right now, radishes and rabbits, podiums and swing sets and sweaters. When we are mindful and persistent, when we attend to these things with persistence and care, then we get wise in our bodies about how to stack crates on a truck, how to shovel snow, how to rake a garden, how to throw a pot, how to care for others who are hurting. We follow the way, bringing forth something we understand as somehow having already been there; we follow the way home to this moment.

So: the stone that marks the way is found in our breathing and in our daydreaming right now. If it were otherwise, there would be no point—it would not be the way. As the ancient Chinese *Daodejing* says,

From the distant past until now, it has been *just this*.

By seeing this, you see the source of all.

How do I know? *By way of this*.

Pilgrims and spiritual sojourners set out, leaving their homes, leaving it all behind, because they are ill at ease—like Dorothy in Kansas. To be deeply lost is frightening, but it is something we can honestly trust and work with. It takes us on and on. To where?

T.S. Eliot says:

We shall not cease from exploration
 And the end of all our exploring
 Shall be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.

Yeah. It is really hard to get to Kansas, even or especially when you are in Kansas. It can seem really hard to get *here*. The Japanese poet Basho put it this way:

Even in Kyoto
 Hearing the cuckoo's cry—
 I long for Kyoto.

All very mysterious, right? How can we long to be where we are? How we can be in search of ourselves? Why do we leave home in search of our true homes?

I think it is like this: Greedy neediness is intrinsic to our egos, and our egos are natural reflexes—just like a knee jerks—rising from our genes. Their function is *not* to show us who we are, or to help us find fulfillment, or find meaning, or to lead a good life, or to be happy. Their function is to increase the probability that this genetic information will pass to the next generation. Society, culture, training: it can inflame and exploit greed (eg., Trump's *The Art of the Deal*) OR it can encourage kindness, trust and generosity. The point of practice, training on the way—be it backpacking, meditation, or committee work—is to go beyond ego and make intimate contact with the world, the whole real world which is our true self. Some seekers start out grasping after something special, some extraordinary experience, some mystery that, through knowing, will

confirm them as special. And they actually can have such experience—and yet remain unfulfilled. Because the search for special spiritual experience diverts us from *this*, these twigs and worms and eggs and leaves and foxes. Every bit of all this is its own very distinct frail self—even though it's all connected every which way—in fact, **BECAUSE** it's all connected every which way.

The Midwestern plains, just as they are right now, express all spiritual teachings. Prior to any idea of God or emptiness or the spirit of life, each small hill is already perfect. All of the mountains and rivers are just like this. And when we walk in the mountains, the mountains are at every moment walking in us and if we don't know that, then we clearly haven't yet seen what walking is. The mountains and waters, what we call “nature,” this is our body. There is nowhere else to come from; there is nowhere else to go. And when we get here, and look around—we do our very best to help.

We can see an example of Zen map of the spiritual path here:

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/weai/exeas/resources/oxherding.html>
