

# AFRAID OF THE JOURNEY

A sermon by F. Jay Deacon

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There's a particular kind anxiety to a journey. I have a favorite destination. I like it fine once I get there: Scottish seaports and mountains, Kew Gardens, the Victoria Embankment — but what a bother it is to get there. To contemplate the airports and getting to them and the security and the microscopic seats — puts me of a mind to wonder why I'd ever leave home.

Despite the bother — there's hardly a more pervasive image in the dreams of people, or in our mythology and scriptures, than this image of a journey. The story of a pilgrim people is our story.

Whether it's the restless and driven like Arthur Miller's salesman, who is always seeking a gold mine in Alaska or, more nobly, countless seekers after God or Destiny, the purpose and End of life, —

or whether it's Brendan, the Brendan of J.R.R. Tolkien's poem "The Death of Brendan," who looks over grey waves straining for something out there, who journeys unknown roads and finds a great mountain rising out of the sea and wreathed in fire, and even *that* isn't what he's looking for, and he rows on beyond even that; like Moses climbing that mountain and seeing the rocky path before him vanishing in flame which he himself will enter — like them, we are drawn onward. Heaven knows where we're going. There is

## READINGS

*From Theodore Parker, from his sermon at his own installation at the 28th Congregational Society in Boston in January 1846:*

If the church by looking after truth, and receiving it when it comes, be in unison with God, it will be in unison with all science . . . It will not lack new truth, daring only to quote, nor be obliged to sneak behind the inspired words of old saints as its only fortress, for it will have words just as truly inspired, dropping from the golden mouths of saints and prophets now. For leaders it will look not back, but forth; it will fan the first faint sparkles of that noble fire just newly kindled from the skies, not smother them in the ashes of fires long spent; not quench them with holy water from Jordan or the Nile.

*In "Song of the Open Road," Walt Whitman wrote:*

Allons! to that which is endless, as it was beginningless, to undergo much, tramps of days, rests of nights,

To see nothing anywhere but what you may reach it and pass it. To look up or down no road but it stretches and waits for you—

To know the universe itself as a road—as many roads—as roads for traveling souls.

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,  
Strong and content I travel the open road.  
You road I enter upon and look around,  
I believe you are not all that is here,  
I believe that much unseen is also here.  
I inhale great draughts of space,  
The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine.  
I am larger, better than I thought,  
I did not know I held so much goodness.



more than bother to this journey.



I want to talk about a religious vision — an integral spirituality — that perceives this roaring Universe of Life not as static, but as *unfolding*. You won't hear from *me* about a standing-still universe that doesn't change, or a changeless forever understanding of Truth, or changeless gods or a once-and-for-all Revelation. Our lives are a journey, and Life is a journey.

But we ache, we get tired, on this long human journey. And we are afraid. We know how much can go wrong. And so we dream, sometimes quite unrealistically, of where we started, a glorious golden magical past.

Which brings to mind those journeyers in the ancient Exodus story. They had set out on a journey and now they are wondering what they ever did *that* for.

They're following Moses and kvetching at him, yeh, but really that's not it. It's something inside them, some seed of destiny that makes them journey. So even though they complain, they walk on — sort of. There's nothing else you can do.

They were slaves, but they knew they were more than that. Something inside them told them they were more.

That something is the same something that spoke in the Indian seer Sri Aurobindo, who died in 1950. He said that the appearance of humans in a material and animal world was

*the first glint of some coming divine*

*Light, the first far-off promise of a*

*godhead to be born out of Matter,*

and he said:

Man is himself a little more than an ambitious nothing. He is a littleness that reaches to a wideness and a grandeur that are beyond him . . . This cannot be the end of the mysterious upward surge of Nature. There is something beyond, something that [human]kind shall be; it is seen now only in

broken glimpses through rifts in the great wall of limitations. . . .<sup>1</sup>

What he is talking about is nothing more or less than the continued evolution of our human capacities — especially the quality of our consciousness. Are we going to keep this journey going? It's up to us. And there has probably never been a more precarious moment in human history, a time of more peril — or more promise.



Those Exodus tribes, too, forgot where they were going. Of course they never really knew, because they hadn't seen it yet. But they forgot the call, they forgot the promise, they forgot the necessity that first led to this journeying. They remembered only where they had been.

Why do we forget and lose our way?

Because, like the Exodus tribes, we recognize ourselves simply and solely as our past. And the answer to the question of our identity, or "Who am I?", most of the time comes down to an abstraction from memory, since what I know of myself is pretty much limited to what I *was*.

But an identity based only on memory is only tracks and echoes from which the great energies of life have vanished.

And we forget — forget what calls us forward, forget this place to which we're going, which we've never seen but only dreamed, the world we must make, because we're afraid of the journey.

And you know, the funny thing is — I shall now unmask our little secret: we *make up our memories* as we go. So we remember where we came from somewhat differently than the way it really was.

In the place they came from, they had all the bread and water they could eat! They were provided with activities to do. They could make bricks. It was orderly. You could depend on it.



But we, like they, cannot stay where we are. In every human life, the evolutionary journey is repeated until we stop somewhere. In the development of a new human life even still in the womb, it is as though the entire sweep of human evolution is represented in every child's growth.

A few billion years of evolution is played out in fast-forward in the development of every one of us. There is more to come. There is more truth, and a higher consciousness, to come.



So then. Why do we look to the past as better, more brilliant and wise and pure?

Here is one reason. We have a problem believing that this human enterprise is heading anywhere good. At first glance we cannot put it together: how can we account for Auschwitz and pointless wars and greed and ecocide and, well, our president?

But the ugliest human impulses are not new; they're not modern inventions. They're a holdover from a more primitive time. It's just that now they're powered by new human capacities and powers. You cannot wipe out a continent and destroy whole cities with bows and arrows. But the *ugly impulses* are not new. Let us not glorify the past. We shouldn't think that the modern world is just a sorry spiritual production compared with, say, ancient Mesopotamia, when the whole world was supposed to bow to some mythic deity, whose temples were built upon the broken backs of millions of enslaved and tortured humans.<sup>3</sup> Slavery and superstition and brutality are still with us, but now we can see beyond them to another possibility. This world of life has more unfolding to do and so do we. We are not here to perpetuate what Ken Wilbur calls the "preposterous groveling at any doctrine whose only authority comes from the fact that it was uttered by a really really ancient sage, centuries or preferably millennia ago."<sup>2</sup>



Don't sing "Give me that old time religion" to me, because it ISN'T good enough for us, or for our world.

Yes, there *is* an ancient perennial wisdom that is timeless, spaceless, formless Truth, not bound to any time or place. But even that wisdom must unfold. It, too, is a journey. And it isn't the proprietary possession of any ecclesiastical institution or bishop or mullah or televangelist.

And there's so very much in that noble past — the brave and visionary pioneers who went before us — to inspire us.

But what we learn from them is that what we are — must be more than a has-been identity consisting only of our past. We must believe in our own becoming; in each others' becoming. We have to look not only *downstream* to how we got this far — we have to look also *upstream* to what's drawing us into the future. We must trust the evolutionary impulse at the heart of us. Here's the trouble with looking back. Time doesn't flow forward from a creator who *made* the world; it flows forward — it must flow forward TOWARD a power that *makes* the world. And that power is an impulse at the heart of us; it has no other hands than ours.

We are a part of that power, and its expressions.

I don't need that old-time religion, the fundamentalist "dominion-theology" that has for too long guided our national policy —

bound to the presumptive authority of an outmoded religious tradition that cannot be questioned —

freeze-dried religion  
(do they still make freeze-dried coffee? Remember that?)

just add water and stir  
and it all comes back, just the way it used to be.

We are greater than our past *but that scares us*.  
Yet something authentic and immediate

and fresh is ready to unfold in us.



And here we are — our lives the result of the material given, what we have been and what we have done, mixed with the passions and dreams and force of character that drive us — and the journey calls us on, and evokes all that in us, and it draws from the hidden dreams and undiscovered powers within us — to become the people — and not incidentally — *the congregation* — this new world requires.



Oh, there is plenty that can go wrong.

There is something else striking about that mythic story in the Book of Exodus. The Exodus journeyers found out that you cannot get to the promised land without passing through some wilderness. There are wilderness periods in human history and there are wilderness patches in our lives. There are times of struggle between what was and can be no more, and what is to be but is not yet, and there you are, and it hurts.

You cannot get from the small stifling past to the wide radiant future without going through the wilderness, that place of nothingness and void and darkness where the accustomed things from the past where you have come from — are no more, but the new life, the bold future, doesn't yet appear. All giving-birth takes place in such places.

It takes imagination — visionary moral imagination — to see around the corner, to envision a future. But isn't that the highest of human capacities? All they could think of was where they had been. They got stuck in that wilderness in between. It doesn't take 40 years to get across that wilderness, but that is how long they wandered there. They wandered until all those who remembered the past and couldn't let go of it — died and were gone, before they could move on.



Finally they trusted the journey itself and let it lead them home. They came to trust the

energies and powers at work in their experience. Wherever they went was new. Nothing could ever be quite the same again.

But how they tried to make it the same! They were tired and afraid. The old and familiar was easy to remember.

The Exodus story is itself is a bit of a horror story of violent conquest of vibrant cultures and their goddesses at the hands of a victorious patriarchy, wiping out all the men and women and children who already inhabited that land and even their animals because they didn't worship a particular jealous and vindictive god.

You want a religion of changeless forever standing still stagnation halted stunted creation? Finished. What you see is all you ever get? We must leave even that story behind. We must write a new story.

And eventually we can come to trust what it is that moves us inwardly and calls us onward.

I have often said that, in its essence, true religion, the spiritual vision we need now, lies *not in turning again and again to ancient dreams* dreamed by those who inhabited a time and place remote from us — the spiritual vision we need, — lies not in the return to ancient dreams, *but in the dreaming*.



We are carried forward by an inward necessity.

We have a journey to make, out of whatever captivities we know, out of the expectations of a society that is too small for our love and our vision, from religious institutions that took fright to the journey long ago and got lost in the wilderness and wandered back to the old kingdom and dispensation because they're afraid of the journey and desperately clutch the past. That is our America today, governed by the faith of a past and alien time. We stand at a crossroads of human history. We will have to keep our eyes on the shining goal that we've only dreamed.



And this journey gives us very great gifts.  
It gives us ourselves, and it gives us each other.  
To aching tired people afraid of the journey:

There is something  
beyond any horizon you can see  
around another corner  
But it's not only there, drawing you, calling  
you forward  
It's here, now, always, already  
It is in you and  
you are in it and of it, part and parcel  
To you:  
whoever and  
wherever and however  
you are:  
There is more to come.



## Hymn

### *Woyaya*

*(We are going, heaven knows where we are going)*

*Mac Tontob, Teddy Osei, Robert Bailey, Wendell Richardson  
Loughby Lasisi Amao, R. Bedeau, & Sol Amarfio*

*We are going, heaven knows where we are going,  
We'll know we're there.*

*We will get there, heaven knows how we will get there,  
We know we will.*

*It will be hard we know  
And the road will be muddy and rough,*

*But we'll get there, heaven knows how we will get there,  
We know we will.*

*We are going, heaven knows where we are going,  
We'll know we're there.*

## *From the conclusion of Thomas Wolfe's You Can't Go Home Again*

I think the true fulfillment of our spirit, of our people, . . . is yet to come. I think the true discovery of our own democracy is still before us. I think that all these things are certain as the morning, as inevitable as noon. . . .

I think the enemy is here before us, too. But I think we know the forms and faces of the enemy, and in the knowledge that we know him, and shall meet him, and eventually must conquer him — is also our living hope. . . . I think the enemy is single selfishness and compulsive greed. I think the enemy is blind, but has the brutal power of his blind grab. . . . I think he stole our earth from us, destroyed our wealth, and ravaged and despoiled our land. I think he took our people and enslaved them, that he polluted the fountains of our life, . . . took our bread and left us with a crust, . . . for the nature of the enemy is insatiate . . . .

Something has spoken to me in the night,  
burning the tapers of the waning year . . .

“To lose the earth you know, for greater knowing; to lose the life you have, for greater life; to leave the friends you loved, for greater loving; to find a land more kind than home, more large than earth —

“—Whereon the pillars of this earth are founded, toward which the conscience of the world is tending — a wind is rising, and the rivers flow.”