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“The Vines Across the Road”

It was a beautiful summer afternoon. We were driving back to Maryland from a visit with Beverly’s relatives in West Virginia. In the car with me were Beverly and our infant son, Beverly’s mother, her grandmother and her great aunt. The traffic was light; the air was clear; it promised to be an uneventful ride home. For the most part we traveled in silence--a silence interrupted only occasionally by mewling from the baby and a barely heard exchange between the passengers in the back seat. Suddenly, Beverly’s mother broke the silence. “Take that next right turn,” she said.

There wasn’t time to argue or to ask questions. I slowed the car and made the turn onto another road which was pleasant, well maintained, but even less traveled. “Where does this road go?” I asked my mother-in-law.

“It’ll take us home,” she said, “but it be a prettier drive, a much more interesting drive.” We rode along the two-lane concrete highway as it gradually carried us up into the mountains. On either side of the road were valley meadows filled with wild flowers and those small volunteer cedar trees that quickly take over abandoned fields. Birds flew from tree to tree or sat perched on heavy stalks singing. The sky was a Walt Disney sky, brilliant blue, punctuated by the occasional white cloud--all in all it was a picture far too romantic to be believable. My mother-in-law had been right again. It was a much more interesting, a much more pleasant drive.

After a while, I noticed a subtle change in the road. As we climbed higher up the mountain, the shoulders on either side had begun to narrow. And after a while, I realized that there was a steep hill immediately on my right, while on the left side of the road a sturdy guard rail protected travelers from a perilous descent down the flank of the mountain. I remember thinking, “I hope she knows where we’re going, because this would not be an easy place to turn around.”

As I drove on, the road seemed to narrow even more. Now, to the right of the road a row of small houses, shacks really, sprouted from the ground to cling precariously to the

steep hillside. On the porch of one of those tiny buildings stood an old wringer-style washing machine. On the porch of another, a dour-faced man in a rocking chair sat staring out across the valley, cradling a rifle on his knees. I decided this was not a place I wanted to stop and ask directions. Looking into the rear-view mirror, I ask my mother-in-law once more if she knew where this road was taking us. She smiled and assured me it would take us home, and remarked that the view out across the valley to the next ridge of mountains was spectacular.

After a while, the concrete road disappeared, and we found ourselves driving along an unpaved road, past more of those ominous looking little shacks as stories of the Hatfields and the McCoys and their fabled feud floated, unbidden, through my brain. Had it been possible, I would have turned around and fled back down the mountain, but by now the road was a single lane and turning was impossible. The only good thing was that we had not encountered another automobile since we had ventured on this road. Nor did it seem likely that we would encounter another vehicle, since I noticed that now there were fresh green vines growing across the road.

As we crested the mountain, the single lane road became two ruts which descended even more precipitously than we had climbed. Now the open space disappeared and the trees of a dark woods closed in around us. Bouncing along, my knuckles white on the steering wheel, wondering what was the responsible thing to do with a car loaded with an infant, two elderly women, my wife and my mother-in-law, I could hear Beverly's mother chatting in the back seat: "Look at that tree; what kind is it? Oh, I used to know. Back there in the shadows, is that a deer? I just love the dark, shady woods on a summer afternoon, don't you?"

In time the descent became more gradual, the woods began to thin out and we found ourselves coming up on a paved road. With a deep breath I pulled the car to a stop and tersely asked my mother-in-law which way I should turn. "Left," she said brightly, and as I pulled onto the road I noticed a sign indicating that we had just come down the mountain on a fire-trail built to allow vehicular access in times of emergency. After a while, even I recognized land marks that suggested that we had found our way to a conventional route home.

"You've never been on that road before, have you?" I said to my mother-in-law.

"Well, no," she said, "but I've often wondered where it went, and now I know. And I was right. It's a lot more interesting way home than the usual route."

In many ways, that experience has remained with me as defining the character and personality of my mother-in-law. She was possessed of an adventurous spirit, always eager to explore new options and untraveled paths. But more than this, over the years

that mountain excursion has become for me a powerful religious metaphor. Reflecting on my journey into the wilds of deepest, darkest West Virginia, I discover that I learned some very important lessons which have stayed with me all through the intervening years.

First of all, I have learned that my mother-in-law was right. This road, indeed all roads--sooner or later--lead home. Curiously, that is just another way of stating the ancient Universalist affirmation that all of us are embarked on the same journey, bound for the same destination. And if that be so, what is important is not the destination, but the journey itself, not where we are going, but the going itself.

For my mother-in-law, life was an adventure, an opportunity, an encounter, because she remained radically open to the world through which she traveled, and she understood that world to be a place of beauty and grace. Though she had been raised a Christian and always thought of herself in terms of that tradition, I believe that at heart she was a druid, drawing strength and nourishment from this world, her home.

Even in her last years, crippled by a stroke and far from the hills she called home, she found strength in watching the changing of the seasons from her window--in the early traces of spring on the hills, in the brilliance of autumn colors, in the quiet beauty of new-fallen snow. And when her travels were in her wheelchair and limited to the journey up and down the halls of the nursing home, she drew upon inner resources, upon memories of the places she had been and the journeys she had taken, to enliven and enrich the narrowed path that had become her life.

In many ways she helped me to discover new spiritual resources as I came to embrace Gaia, this living planet as my mother and my home, my place of origin and my ultimate destiny. In many ways, my understanding of post-Christian Unitarian Universalism has emerged out of that spiritual grounding.

The second thing I learned is that the spiritual journey, for me, is not a private or isolated experience. What gave that crazy trip up and down the mountain its deepest and most profound meaning was the fact that I did not travel it alone. With me on that unanticipated enterprise, were four generations for whom I was responsible, and who implicitly trusted me to steer them through this adventure. Perhaps they were foolish in their trust, but the experience was neither unique nor uncommon. Over and over again, recklessly or with good reason, we commit ourselves into the keeping of others, and we accept responsibility for others. For on this journey from one darkness to another, we are never alone; we are always companioned.

Up and down the mountain, my mother-in-law exuded confidence in my ability to complete the journey in safety, all the while inviting her companions to look, to see this

world of beauty and wonder and surprise and delight. And in the process she held at bay whatever panic any reasonable person might have felt; for, who could panic in the face of such confidence. And again, in that experience I came face to face with the religious understanding that life is very much like learning to play the piano in public and that what we have to give to each other is encouragement and trust and whatever strength and skill we may possess. We are always, each other's keepers, nurturing and being nurtured, responsible and trusting. There is no power--to save us from our folly or to endow our journey with meaning--that is greater than our love for each other, our commitment to each other.

Often, when I find myself questioned by people who are encountering our religious tradition for the first time, when they want to know what it is that distinguishes us as a religious people, I find myself drawn to that experience on a mountain road in West Virginia. I find myself saying that Unitarian Universalism, a creedless religion, is focused upon a concern for a moral, ethical, responsive life.

We understand that all individuals must be free to embrace their own beliefs concerning the nature of god, humanity and the universe. But we share an underlying theological conviction that what is of central importance is how we live together as children of the same great love, how we journey together in the great adventure which is life, how we acquit our responsibility to each other and how we express our trust in each other. As a religious people, we are focused on this world and our responsibility to create here a community in which the human spirit can be nurtured and sustained.

The truth is that we do not always know where we are going, or even precisely where we are. But we journey together, in congregations of multiple generations, in voluntary associations of free women and men. We know that however we may define it, we are bound for the same destination. We journey through mountains and valleys, through familiar places and unexplored territory, along paved roads and into places where the vines grow over the rutted trails. But we journey together. We call each other to look and to see the glory and the grace of this world which is our home. We comfort each other when we are beset by doubts and fears. We rejoice together when the road before us opens up. We lend each other support in times of distress and we encourage each other to become the very best it is in us to be.

We challenge each other to act with integrity and courage in the face of profound and significant crises, to build into our lives those values and principles we hold most dear; we remind each other that our responsibilities extend beyond these walls and beyond this gathered assembly. Our responsibility embraces all our sisters and brothers who share this journey between two great darknesses, and any practices that shadow their lives, diminish our own. Our duty is to build lives that affirm our kinship with all that lives and moves and has being on this beautiful, fecund planet.

Ours is a very special tradition, grown from the visions and dreams of unnumbered women and men. Here we call to each other across the generations, inviting each other to see and to hear, to explore and discover, to live with integrity and to act with power. Here we laugh together and weep together and set out together and arrive together. We do not negate, or deny, or diminish our differences, but we know that on this journey what matters is that unity which underlies all our differences and which makes us one, in spite of time and death and the space between the stars.