



Directions to Oz: Finding Wholeness

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The Universalist Unitarian Church of Santa Paula

There is an Indian proverb that says that everyone is a house with four rooms, a physical, a mental, an emotional and a spiritual. Most of us tend to live in one room most of the time, but, unless we go into every room every day, even if only to keep it aired, we are not a complete person.

And from Michael Grosso, in his book: **Soulmaker**

Great dreams contain inexhaustible truths and orient us, like runes, toward our futures. One hesitates to try and explain them, one wants to dance them, act them out in living gestures. The more we put ourselves into a great dream, the more we get back. Great dreams are wells that never run dry.

There is in all things a hidden wholeness, said mystic and monk Thomas Merton. In human beings this wholeness goes by many names: Merton himself called it the “true self”. In Buddhism they speak of “original nature” or “big self”. Quakers use the term “inner light” or “inner teacher”. In Judaism, in the Hasidic line, it is known as “the spark of the divine”. Humanists call it integrity. Often it is known simply as “soul.” (Palmer, *Undivided Life*, 32) It is that part of us which makes each of us uniquely who we are, and which, when well lived, grants us wholeness. We are born with it, much as we are born with our own DNA.

I remember in seminary, a dear friend who was training to be a Baptist minister, so he could return to the slums in which he was raised, to be of use there among the people he knew and loved – he would often greet me from across campus or a classroom, all six foot four of him leaning toward me, to ask: “Carolyn, how goes it with your soul?”

At first, I was taken aback by this. I wasn’t used to people asking about my soul. It seemed a lot more personal than the usual, Western way of greeting: “how are you?”, in which we expect only of course the standard response, “fine.”

My friend meant to be personal, of course, to truly ask about my innermost well being; the core of my personhood. And over time, each of us struggling in our own way to make our way through a seminary in which we only partly belonged – he, because his upbringing in poverty and borderline-illiteracy had left him poorly prepared for the academic rigors of a classical divinity school and me because I was always the heretic – the Unitarian Universalist – the one with the different, and in some people’s eyes, dangerous theology. Both outsiders, we found in one another kindred spirits.

I hope all goes well with his soul.

Our own Unitarian Universalist kin, and great American poet, Mary Oliver, tells us: *This is the first, wildest and wisest thing I know ... that the soul*

exists and that it is built entirely out of attentiveness.” She suggests to us that who we are at our core, at the center of our being, offers the greatest truth of our identity when and only when we give that core, that deep place of self, our attention.

Our earliest Unitarian forebears in this country knew this. To the doctrine of the day, which said that human beings are born in sin, with evil everywhere inside them, these brave and thoughtful men and women, heretics all, replied, “no”. They looked within and declared that children are born pure, and in goodness; their whole being an incarnation of the holiness, and wholeness, of god. Even today, some hundreds of years later, we hear the echo of those courageous heretics in our theology – in our first principle, when we speak of the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

So today, our version of the question, “how goes it with your soul”, might be “how goes it with your inherent worth and dignity?” Hmm. We lose something there, don’t we, in our rational and reasoned desire to not speak the language of religion? So for today, just for today, I ask your indulgence, that we may return to the words of poetry and spirit, of depth and beauty - to the language of the heart. We can begin as I ask you, just as I was asked: *how goes it with your soul?*

There are many ways we lose the wholeness we are born into and born with. For some, this happens, sadly, in childhood – that we begin to feel our center splinter. If we are lucky, we make it to young adulthood. But sooner or later, for almost all of us, our sense of living and being, of speaking and acting utterly true to who we are begins to fade as the pressures of living in the world take their toll on our souls.

Parker Palmer, a teacher, activist, and Quaker outlines some of the ways this separation from self, or broken wholeness manifests. He sees it when we¹:

- Remain in settings or situations or relationships that steadily kill off our spirit
- Hide our beliefs from those who disagree with us to avoid conflict, challenge, and change
- Make our living at jobs that violate our basic values, even when our survival does not absolutely demand it
- Or when we do not truly give ourselves to our work, diminishing its quality and distancing ourselves from those it is meant to serve.

Certainly, there are examples in the world around us, in the stories of Enron, Abu Ghraib, Blackwater, the Roman Catholic church. What these

¹ *A Life Lived Whole*, Parker Palmer, excerpted in *Yes! Magazine*, Winter 2005.

stories have in common is a lack of values which affirm the health and wholeness of all . For values are the life-blood of our souls, the animating forces of the truth of our being. As Anne Mulcahy, the Chairman and CEO of Xerox, has noted:

“Who you are, what your value are, what you stand for ... these are your anchor, your north star. You won’t find them in a book. You’ll find them in your soul.”²

I promised you this morning a visit to Oz, even directions for getting there. Let’s go to Kansas for a moment. Remember Dorothy, the young girl, whose parents died and left her to be raised by her Auntie Em and Uncle Henry? It’s the depression in America and the already flat and somewhat bleak state of Kansas is made even more so. The adults are working hard just to stay alive, and don’t have a lot of time for a 12 year old girl, an age, by the way, of near adolescence - of youth and innocence on the brink, an age when many begin to feel the forces of growing up in a demanding, confusing world shaking their wholeness. Dorothy, lonely and terrified that she’ll lose her best friend, Toto, her little dog, because of a mean witch of a neighbor woman, decides this isn’t where she belongs anymore, and she imagines a land, somewhere over the rainbow ...

And in a moment, as a tornado blows, we leave the bleak, sepia-tones of Kansas, and we land, along with Dorothy in the living, Technicolor world of Oz. We’re right there with Dorothy, gazing all around, when she says, “Toto - I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.” And we stay with her as she sets out on a journey to find, and to remember, who she is, as we all must, not just when we are adolescents, but every time we grow and change, for all of our lives.

Dorothy finds companions on the journey, though they are not what she expects. There is the tin man who squeaks and rattles and cries so much he rusts his own skin. There is the Lion, large and clumsy, who is afraid of everything. And the scarecrow, who believes he is empty inside, only made of straw. But Dorothy needs them all, knowing - perhaps for the first time - that she cannot go it alone in life. And her child’s heart sees them not as they see themselves; but through her innocence and of trust she sees their wholeness long before the trickery of an all too human wizard allows them to see it for themselves. And in so doing, Dorothy begins to see within, and to understand her own inner truth and integrity.

In Oz, this place beyond the rainbow, the questions all of us reckon with as we grow, as we live out of and become our true selves, confront Dorothy and her companions, questions like ... is this who I am? Am I real? Is this world real? Am I brave? Am I strong and smart enough? Is this where I am supposed to be, and what I am supposed to do and who I am meant to become?

² Ibid, p. 70.

We can see Oz as that place we go when we don't think we belong where we are anymore; when we're not comfortable in our own skin; when we lose faith in ourselves. Oz is a place of testing; and of danger and opportunity. A place for finding out what is real and true.

We follow Dorothy along that yellow-brick road, with all of its mythic characters of good and evil, and temptation and possibility. We follow her, and the Tin man and the Lion and the Scarecrow, across that strange land - and we realize with Dorothy that she belongs back home. So Oz becomes that place that leads us, if we are paying attention, and if we refuse to yield the best of ourselves (as Dorothy refused) - back to who we are and to our truest life.

In Oz, Dorothy encounters two of the forces that can splinter our wholeness: power and wealth. After she kills the bad witches, she is worshipped in Oz. But she doesn't want to become their new favorite good witch or rule the people. She doesn't want that worldly power. She only wants to go home. Because home is her place, no matter how dull or quiet she thought it was. And all the gold of Oz cannot make up for losing her Auntie Em and Uncle Henry, losing her identity as their family and as the friend of those good hearted farm hands.

At last Dorothy gets to go home. The wizard, who of course is just a man, offers to take her in his balloon. But Toto runs off again, and Dorothy - as much as she wants to go - cannot leave Toto, cannot leave love. Her values - her sense of true north - will not allow this. Near despair, she learns another lesson of wholeness - maybe the greatest lesson - that what she needs she already has; she has always had. And, speaking the words of her heart "there's no place like home; there's no place like home"; she clicks her pretty red slippers, and wakes up in her very own room.

We cannot become whole on our own. Even here, in America, land of the "I can do it myself" modality, the health of our souls needs the company of others. This, too, is a part of our history as a religious community. Long, long ago when our churches formed on these shores, they formed as "communions of souls", as men and women who covenanted with one another to walk through life with one another, to live together in the world in the ways of god. Some 400 years later, we hear their echoes too, in our seventh principle, affirming the interdependence of all life.

And how we know if we are living in wholeness? Again, we can look to our own north star and see if we are following it, if we are living out our deepest values. We could, today, talk about people like Gandhi or even Benazir Bhutto, may they rest in peace, to look at examples, but right here, in this congregation there are stories of those whose lives reflect wholeness.

When the Atmores and Hardisons were farming this valley, for many if not most of the land owners the farm hands were seen as only workers, less important and worthy than those who owned the farms, and in some cases little better than low-paid slaves. Substandard pay and housing were often the norm. Yet Allan and Logan, these Universalists, saw in the men and

women who worked their lands the same light of love, or light of God, that the early Universalists saw in all human beings. They saw them as fully equal in worth and dignity and no less a part of the living web of life present in the valley than they. And though it did not make them popular, these two families chose to compensate their workers fairly and with respect, and in so doing acted out of their wholeness, and lived their values in relationship - which is the truest test of a life well lived.

I heard a story of a well known college where in the business degree program a young woman was outraged, because, having studied hard for the final exam in a class, she was faced with an unusual last question. It read: what is the name of the person who cleans your dorm? She raised her hand and asked her professor if he was serious. Indeed he was, he told the class, adding that he knew most of them had plans to become President or CEO of a rich and successful company, but that this would come only to those who could work with everyone, as part of a team, a committed whole. He cautioned that if they did it any other way, they would lose the most important part of themselves - their integrity - and they would not, no matter how great their product or service, truly contribute to the good of the world.

The name of the woman who cleans our church is Albie. She has been doing this job for many years. Each fall, she sets aside a full day to polish the floor in the parish hall, a huge job, so then when the new church year begins, it looks fresh and clean. Just last month we gave her a bonus, for Christmas, to thank her for her devotion to the care of our building.

How do we know when we are living soul-filled lives, acting from our truest, highest selves. We know it when we:

- Are drawn to and stay in settings or situations or relationships that steadily lift or teach or feed our spirit, that call us back to who we are and our best selves - much as Oz called Dorothy back to Kansas.
- Speak or share our beliefs with those who disagree with us to create challenge and change, especially when we speak for the good of those who cannot speak out for themselves
- Work - in paid or volunteer capacities - or use our hours on earth in ways that embody our values, not necessarily because of what the job is or the product or service it creates, but by how we give ourselves to that work - with our whole selves present to the task, whatever it may be.
- Act in ways that uphold the web of life - at our homes, our work places, around town, or in our church. We cannot do harm the web, our native American brothers and sisters remind us, without doing harm to ourselves. And we only truly grow that web when we serve not just ourselves, but others.

The same is true for an organization, including one like this community, as for an individual. And just this week our Board President and I have been exploring our shared hope that later in the year this community will begin a process of exploring the soul (or the deepest, truest truth) of this church, of discerning our own North Star.

The directions to Oz are simple: go where you are called, go to the places that make your heart sing, go toward your dreams, even if they take you over the rainbow. That is where you will find the way back to your true place, your highest self, and to the home you were born to know. Go with the love of the Universalists, and the goodness of the Unitarians. Go, with the faith of all who believe that there's no place like home; there's no place like home.

How goes it with your soul?