

# Following What You Love

A sermon by Seanan Holland, UUCR Ministerial Intern

Why do we dream? Not the dreams of sleep, but the dreams of aspiration and of hope. And why do we come to follow one dream over another. Why do we risk so much in pursuing them. And who do we become as we follow what we love.

Each of us has our own story, our own dreams. What makes us human is that we share this need to figure out what to do with our dreams – which road to follow. What makes us unique is the way those dreams fit in to the stories of our lives – why and how we chose a particular road.

Ever since I was eight years old, I knew I wanted to fly. I wanted to be a pilot. As a teenager, my family supported me in a kind of pilgrimage to the Dayton air museum at Wright Patterson Air Force base – they encouraged me to follow this thing that I loved. I wanted to design and fly airplanes, which I did in high school – by my sophomore year, I was designing and building my own models. Some of them even flew for a little while. So half way through college, when I came home and found a pamphlet on my doorstep, I couldn't not respond. There was a picture of a pilot in his flight suit with his helmet under his arm standing in front of a jet. At the bottom of the pamphlet, it said dial 1-800-MARINES. What was I going to do, not dial. Aviation had been a part of me as a dream, as something that I loved, ever since I was a kid. I saw this as opportunity knocking. By now I think some of you have a sense that I am a thoughtful person. So I gave this a few days thought, and then with some nervousness, I called the number.

How many other interests passed me by. How many other dreams and possibilities might be lost for this one...

Perhaps aviation was in my genetic make up. There's a gene for everything now, right? But genes aren't the whole story in this story.

When I was seven years old, I did one of those things that my parents warned me about, that parents everywhere warn their children about. We were playing tag at the school bus stop, and I ran out across the street from behind a parked car. I was running diagonally up the street, and I went head on with a pick-up truck that was coming the other way. The collision actually threw me clear of the truck's path. On the outside there wasn't much damage, but the doctors said I had a lot of internal damage. I walked out of the hospital, not quite a week later. I was young enough that I didn't understand what all the concern was about, but the doctors said I was a lucky boy.

You may be wondering what this story has to do with following a dream? More than a decade later in college, when I found that pamphlet, what would this encounter with a truck have to do with choosing one road or the other? This is my Unitarian Universalist providence story. I'm not sure if it was before or after the truck incident, but around that same time, I was reading the

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children's story of the Wright Brothers. You may not know that before the Wright brothers were famous in aviation, they were famous on the sledding hills in Dayton, Ohio. They had used their father's tools to build themselves a new sled. It was lower to the ground than other sleds on the hill, and it was long enough for them to lie down on rather than sit on – like the other sleds. They had figured out wind resistance and designed a sled that would let them get under the wind. Their father, who was a minister, looked the sled over and listened to their explanation, and finally he said that, "God must be saving you two boys for some special work." Of course I knew what this work was – they would be inventors and fly an airplane.

All of us have dreams. All of us come to these forks in the road of life and we have to figure out which one to follow. The fact that I survived that collision with the moving truck stayed with me from a young age – and the possibility that I didn't have to survive it added weight to this matter of what path I belonged on. I admit this is probably an odd thing for a little kid to be thinking about, and until seminary, it was a fairly private thought for me. But I came to it again and again – sometimes I was reminded by something I was reading, or sometimes by hearing someone else's story. I came back to this question: "What purpose am I here for?"

All of us have stories that fit together somehow to bring us to where we are. We all eventually have to negotiate which road we follow. The poets understand this basic feature of life. Langston Hughes offers these thoughts that might guide us in how we navigate this basic human dilemma.

Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken winged bird  
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.

I had a dream, and for years it had held fast to me. Then, when I was 20, I was at a cross roads and had to decide if I would hold fast to it, or let it go. When I picked up that flyer, ((that challenge, because that is essentially what it was for me)), when I picked up that challenge from the Marine Corps recruiter, I could no more resist calling the number than Robert Frost could have taken the Road More Traveled.

If we read the Road Not Taken casually, we find a poem that bounces along almost merrily, almost merrily. On first reading, we might even think this is a playful reflection about a common existential dilemma in the human experience – if I take one road, I may never come back to even see the other. Such a reading would belie the heavier themes that appear in many of his other poems, and indeed the heavier events and losses of his life.

When fate presents us with two roads, diverging in the woods, and we hold fast to the dreams that would lead us down one rather than the other, eventually we learn of disappointment. Like

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Langston Hughes says, we need our dreams like a bird needs wings. But following our dreams does not keep us free from disappointment and sadness. No matter how well we discern our path, life still involves both blessings and pain. The simple fact that there will be pitfalls does not hinge on which path we choose. The poets know about this duplicitous character of the muses of fate.

Joy and woe are woven fine...  
Under every grief and pine  
Runs a joy with silken twine.  
It is right it should be so  
[We were] made for joy and woe.

Adapted from  
William Blake

I am as fascinated with aviation now as I was when I was eight years old. I could stand at the end of the runway all day and watch planes and helicopters take off and land – over and over again. But my fascination is tempered with experience.

There are certain kinds of woes along this path of aviation – woes that fit hand in hand with the joy and fascination of it. It's possible that if I hadn't chosen the path of aviation, I might not have felt the pain of losing friends and fellow Marines in mishaps or war. But equally as true, even if I hadn't chosen aviation, someone else would have, and somebody, somewhere would suffer the loss of loved ones, somebody somewhere would suffer the many other less severe anxieties that go with flying,, and with life – whatever life we choose. I was fortunate for most of my career that I did not have to face moral ambiguity. Many of you know that my thoughts about war are difficult to make concise. But eventually the path I had chosen would trouble my heart. Who have I become in following what I love. So along with the joy of fulfilling a dream, I have also learned to live with that disappointment.

All of us have dreams and stories that fit together somehow to bring us to where we are. Maybe our effort was invested in an advanced degree, or maybe we set out to build a church, or maybe our path led us to a particular church... In the years since the encounter with the truck – a particular part of my particular story, I have had time to reflect. I have had a seminary experience that demanded that I reflect how are stories become part of our lives. In this reflection, there is a larger question, “Can I be present to the places where your dreams, your delights, and also your disappointments intersect.” Robert Frost, Langston Hughes, William Blake and others point to this place. When we reach out to greet each other on Sunday morning, can we be aware of this deeper place in the sacred other that we reach out to. In following our dreams and encountering our own delights and disappointments, can we see these things as sacred in ourselves and in others.

It was in flight school that I came upon another fork in the road of life. And again the message appeared on my door step. I had just moved into a new neighborhood – a little trailer park in West Florida. A couple weeks after I had moved in, a few people arrived at my doorstep, knocked, and asked if they could come in. They were very friendly and welcomed me into the neighborhood. I

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was very impressed by the hospitality of that gesture. I didn't really expect to see them again, but two weeks later, the same folks came back. This time I understood more clearly that their hospitality was a religious commitment – one of religion's best aspirations, to be sure. But it was also clear that their deeply held religious commitments were quite different than my as yet unformed religious commitments. I declined their invitation to attend their church, which was Baptist. And I called a friend from college who was Baptist. We talked for a long time about my sense that something spiritual was missing from my life. And before we hung up she said, "What you need to do is go to the yellow pages and find the nearest Unitarian Universalist church." Another fork in the road.

William Blake speaks of joy as an essential part of human life. Perhaps it takes some courage or openness, or some great need to find that joy, but it is there for the finding. Just as I was about to graduate from flight school, I took my friends advice, and I found the Pensacola Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. This was a salvation moment for me – an immanent, earthly salvation, yes. I had stumbled upon the good news that I needed to hear. I had found a spiritual community in which I could make sense of my upbringing in a diverse, international setting. Unitarian Universalism was a place that welcomed the diversity I felt comfortable with. It was a home that could hold the range of possibilities in human life. I was the youngest person there by probably two decades, and I have to say I was joyful and perhaps even a little amused to find such a church – our closing hymn that first Sunday was the Beatles, Ob La Di Ob La Da. Which I later learned is a Yoruba phrase from Africa that means, "Life goes on." Whatever road we travel, life goes on – in all its complexity.

During the coffee hour after the service a man with a ponytail and a beard came over to me and introduced himself. We talked for a while and then he leaned in and told me somewhat privately that he was retired Navy and that he had been the commanding officer of Training Squadron Three – right next door to my squadron. I wondered why this news might somehow be a secret.

I visited the Pensacola fellowship one more time before I got orders to advanced training. I looked up the closest UU congregation to New River, North Carolina. And that was my pattern for the next ten years. Every time I got orders for a new duty station, I would look up the nearest UU congregation. And every time I visited a UU congregation for the first time, someone would come over to me, sometimes a man and sometimes a woman, but they would see my short hair and come over and quietly tell me that they had been a Corporal with Third Marines in Viet Nam or they were the Chief of Nursing at the hospital on base.

I have been welcomed warmly at every Unitarian Universalist church I have attended. But most of us who are in the military have a story or two of being turned away or being questioned about our differentness.

After being a member or friend of a few different congregations, eventually it was hard for me not to notice that we are a denomination that is mostly white and middle class. We as Unitarian Universalists, and we, as Americans, have not yet realized the vision of pluralism that we hope for. I have been surprised to hear members of our churches, reject the possibility of white privilege. I

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have been surprised when hurtful words were directed at an openly Christian Unitarian Universalist.

I had discovered disappointment in this thing that I love. As wide as our circle is, it sometimes shrinks at differentness and change. We have so much to offer. Maybe it was through faith in the goodness we have to offer that my willingness and hope were sustained. Maybe it was faith in our vision and values that let me live in Unitarian Universalism long enough to understand that I would meet both joy and woe in following the thing that I love.

It is fundamental to the human experience that we will know both joy and disappointment as we follow our dreams. The question for us as a religious people is, what shall we do. What is our response to this two-ness of existence?

Langston Hughes comes at it from a little bit different direction than the Beatles. He says:

I'm still here

I've been scared and battered.  
My hopes the wind done scattered.  
Snow has friz me, sun has baked me.  
    Looks like between 'em  
    They done tried to make me  
Stop Laughin', stop lovin', stop livin'  
    But I don't care!  
    I'm still here.

When I first walked in to the Pensacola UU Fellowship, I found good news. And I figured that eventually I would be permitted into some back room and a minister would reveal a great tome. I would be allowed to read a particular page and understand the secret source of the good news I had experienced. I hate to disappoint you. Fifteen years later, four years of seminary, I still have not been granted access to the revelation.

But I'm still here. And the truth I've discovered isn't written in some ancient language in a magical tome. The truth I've discovered is here among us. The good news of Unitarian Universalism is not that we have found or created a road that is free from sorrow, disappointment or existential dilemma. We haven't discovered a roadside vista that offers endless bliss. It is in the perfectly, imperfect way that we make room for each other.

In following what I love, in following what we love, we have created a community, a community of covenant – an implicit promise that we will do our best in right relationship, that we will stand by each other in navigating the roads of life – in all of their joy and woe.

May we hold fast to our dreams, even as we might have to trade one of them for another. And may we stand by each other to celebrate our joys and support each other through our sorrows.

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Blessed be the roads we travel.

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