

## The Opposite of Certainty

Readings: 'Ode To Teachers' by Pat Mora  
'The Journey' by Mary Oliver  
'A Second Train Song for Gary' by Jack Spicer

In creative writing, there is a cliché that all stories start in one of two ways -- 'I started out on a journey' or 'a stranger came to town.'

Today, as I begin a series of sermons exploring the deadly sins and the heavenly virtues, I want to tell you two stories – one with each beginning that explores the virtue of faith. Our Unitarian Universalist faith does not offer easy answers. How does it teach us to live faithfully?

Our first story is an ancient story. As my old testament professor would say about stories like this, none of it happened; all of it's true. A man goes on a journey. Jacob, a patriarch of the Israelites, sets off on a journey to return to the land of his birth and reunite with his brother Esau or so it is written in the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures. The relationship between Jacob and Esau is terrible – they are twins who began fighting in the womb and never stopped. Jacob, the younger twin, is a trickster who takes advantage of the trusting natures of his father Isaac and his brother– first convincing Esau to give up his birthright in exchange for a bowl of stew, then impersonating Esau in order to receive a blessing from Isaac. In the ancient Near East where these stories originated, both of these actions are serious offenses. Jacob then flees to escape Esau's wrath. He spends decades living far away before returning to the land of his birth.

By the time he sets out on his journey, Jacob has become a rich and powerful man. He is accompanied by his wives, his concubines, his children, his servants, and hundreds of livestock. On the night before he reunites with Esau, Jacob sends the whole entourage on ahead. He plans to spend a night alone. That is not what happens. In the night, a being appears – and Jacob wrestles with him until daybreak. The original Hebrew here is strange and mysterious. In the original language of this story, the word used to describe the being that Jacob wrestles is a word that can mean both a human person or a divine being. Some of the tradition that's grown around this story says that Jacob wrestled an angel – but the text doesn't say whether this being was divine or human. Jacob wrestles someone, someone divine perhaps, or maybe someone human. They wrestle all night. Jacob hurts his hip and is left limping for the rest of his life. As the day breaks, Jacob says, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." So that divine or human being blesses Jacob, giving him a new name, 'Israel' which means 'he who has striven with God and with humans and prevailed.' And then Jacob limps off to reunite with his brother.

I want to linger with Jacob wrestling that being this morning, because it is a beautiful description of the life of faith. As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm and promote the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We don't provide answers. Every person is encouraged to strive with humans and the sources of ultimate meaning. We wrestle with truths and contradictions that we might never be able to reconcile. We wrestle with the natural and the supernatural. We wrestle with the latest cosmology and the knowledge that we are tiny specs in a vast universe. How do we reconcile that with our subjective reality that we are the center of the universe? We wrestle. Those of us who believe in God wrestle with God, as we try to understand God's nature. How can a loving God be reconciled with so much suffering in this world? Many of us wrestle with our personal demons, whether they be grief, addiction, persistent illness or so many others. How do we make meaning out of pain? And many of us wrestle with despair. How do we face the world as it is, feel the despair, and not allow despair to have the last word? This will be an

especially challenging, especially important task for us this political season. Despair cannot have the last word.

Wrestling with these challenges and contradictions—and all the others that animate our particular journeys of faith—is challenging and important work. Often, like Jacob, the struggle changes us forever. We are left limping for the rest of our days. We are transformed – blessed and given a new name.

To live faithfully in this world of pain and promise is to wrestle with all we don't yet understand, with all that is strange and mysterious, with the questions and contradictions and challenges that might always linger for us. To live faithfully is to engage with the human and the divine and emerged altered for good and bad – and blessed as someone who have striven with God and humanity, blessed for making a great effort and for struggling.

Living faithfully is about wrestling with what is unresolved in our hearts, but is also about acting courageously. Faithful living is about trusting in one another and our abilities, even when we doubt. Making the first move even when the path ahead is unclear. Faith is about stepping out on nothing, and just hoping to land on something.

Which brings us to our second story. This is a true story, a modern story.

A stranger came to town. Or, in this case, seven strangers came to our town. Mike, can you show their picture? This is the Altyara family. The back row, from left to right is Moayad, who is 17; Molham, 20; Adham, 21, Khaled and Fatema. In the front is Omar and Abdullah, 11 year old twins. They are originally from Homs, Syria. When fighting came to their city, they fled, becoming refugees. They spent a few years in Jordan. When it became clear that it would not be safe for them to return home, they applied to be resettled. They arrived here in Kalamazoo last June. People's Church has been working with Bethany Christian Services to resettle them and help them integrate into our community. There will be opportunities for those of you who haven't yet met the Altyaras to meet them and learn more of their stories. They are also living a story of faith – faith and trust that we can help them navigate this unfamiliar country, faith that they can rebuild their lives here.

But first, the prologue, the story of how we welcomed these strangers to town. Almost a year ago, in one of my first sermons here as your minister, I preached about the Syrian refugee crisis. A few of you thought, “we can do something about this...” and started taking action. Making phone calls and figuring out how refugee resettlement works, learning who we would have to partner with if we wanted to do this. We learned that Bethany Christian Services was thinking of resettling families in Kalamazoo. They had a meeting here with us last spring, explaining all that we would have to do if we committed to co-sponsoring a family. It was a long list. After that meeting, I huddled with a few of you in the work room. We had doubts. This was a big new thing. We've never done anything like this before. We knew it would be a lot of work. “Should we sign up to do this?” “I think we can do this?” “Let's sign up.” We were moving into the unknown—having faith in ourselves and one another. It has felt like stepping out into nothing, hoping to land on something. At every step so far, there has been ground there to meet us.

Moving into the unknown can be terrifying. What's the ground ahead of us like? Are there obstacles we can't foresee? Sometimes the only option is to have faith in ourselves and cross our fingers that, by chance or sheer force of will, things will work out. Our refugee resettlement team has been acting with so much faith and so much trust as they welcome the Altyaras, who are no longer strangers, to town. They are a powerful example of what faithful living can be.

We see this in the search for a place for the Altyaras to live. Some of you know this story. Some of you lived this story. The Altyaras were set to arrive in a few days and we still hadn't found them housing. It was challenging to find them a place to live that was available, was big enough for a family of seven, and wasn't very expensive, so the family could quickly move toward self-sufficiency. People on the resettlement team were working every angle they knew, talking to everyone they could. One of the people they talked to attends St. Thomas More Catholic Parish. She made a special announcement during a mass about the search for housing. One person told her that the house next door to her might work; the owner was looking for a tenant. Our team checked it out, but someone had just signed a lease. But then the other possible tenant backed out and the home was ours. But that's not the end of the story. The house was in terrible shape. Over just a few days, People's people, members of St. Tom's, and other members of our community put in long hours rehabbing the home. They did work worthy of one of those home renovation shows on HGTV. The bathroom finishing touched happened just before the van carrying the Altyaras arrived from the airport.

I don't believe that if you ask, the universe provides. That's a lie. I believe in the power of humanity to transform the world for the worse and for the better. It was a series of human decisions and actions that created the conditions that led the Altyara family—and over 10 million other Syrians—to flee their homes. They have faith that there must be a better life for them somewhere. It is also human action that welcomes them to a new home and helps them establish a new life.

People's Church is the family's co-sponsoring partner. Dozens of members of People's church have generously given their time and energy and money in so many ways. That generosity extends beyond these walls. As our team has worked, they have built connections across Kalamazoo. Members of the Kalamazoo Islamic Center have opened their building to English tutoring for refugees every Saturday. They have provided culturally appropriate food and taught us how to help the Altyaras while respecting their beliefs. Local folks who are from the Arab world or fluent in Arabic have provided invaluable interpretation. A local dental practice volunteered their time to get this family the dental care they needed. A yoga teacher training class that rented a room in our building a few weeks ago saw our donation bin and filled it up with supplies and money. The property manager for the Altyaras has started working with other co-sponsoring congregations and is renting to other refugee families. Other congregations and community groups in town have seen what we can do and are now co-sponsoring other refugee families, including Fatema's brother's family. That is what faithful living looks like. The team has stepped forward, trusting that the ground would meet them – and found themselves in new relationships with others, transforming lives, and transforming themselves.

Our step forward in faith has changed the lives of the Altyaras, but it is also changing us and changing our community. We are building new relationships. We are working together with Catholics, Muslims, dentists, yoga teachers, and so many others. We are showing that we can attempt this big new thing and make a difference in the world. Yes, there are 10 million refugees and internally displaced people in Syria. We can't help all of them. But we can make a huge difference for seven of them.

And the work isn't over. I said earlier that I don't believe the universe provides, but I do believe that if you ask the right people, they are likely to provide. So now, on behalf of the refugee resettlement team, I have a few things to ask of all of you, things that will help the Altyaras move forward on their journey here. The first—and most important—is that Khaled needs a job. In Syria and in Jordan, Khaled repaired the electric motors for water pumps. He is not limited to that kind of work—and that work might not be possible for him until his English is better. The biggest barrier between Khaled and employment is that his English is limited. Who do you know who might be able to hire him? Who do you know who might be able to connect

him to that person? Think creatively. Talk to the human resources department at your workplace. Talk to the business owners you know. Talk to your friend who just seems to know everyone. If you have a promising lead, please pass it along to me and I'll get it to the right people.

Next, we'd like children's books, especially books for new readers. Having a small collection of good books will help the whole family learn English. These can be new or gently used. Please bring them to church.

This winter will be the Altyaras' first Michigan winter. Right now, they—and the other families who have been resettled in Kalamazoo—do not have the winter clothes they need. Our children are going to be leading a winter clothing drive soon as part of their fights against injustice. Look for announcements to come. In the meantime, hold onto gently used winter gear – and if you are able to buy something new, please consider that. Don't worry too much about sizes. Between the dozens of people who need clothes, we'll find a good home for everything.

My final ask is for volunteer drivers. If you are willing to drive the Altyaras occasionally, please let me know. We've had a wonderful group of drivers so far—and we'd like to expand their ranks.

It is a powerful thing we are doing, welcoming no-longer-strangers to town. There are many more powerful stories of relationship, transformation, and faith that have been part of our refugee resettlement story and more that are sure to unfold.

Let us keep wrestling with what is unresolved in our hearts.

Let us keep moving forward with faith and trust.

Let us keep asking for help as we need it and keep stepping up to offer what we can.

May we keep living lives of faith.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.