

The Road Goes Ever On and On

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As we left the story last time, Julia and her goofy dog Molly had lost, and found, the missing wallet and were heading out from Asheville, North Carolina, into the unknown.

For those new to this continuing saga, let me recap the beginning of the tale.

I had been working in real estate for the better part of twenty years. Turning fifty had opened a new period of reflection and self-evaluation. I was asking the same questions that we all ask. "What's it all about?" "Am I living a life that matters?" "What does really matter?" And the desire to open my heart in new ways was becoming a consuming preoccupation.

In my fiftieth year, I spent January by myself in a retreat center, and in June I went camping in east Africa with my younger daughter. I had dreamed of Africa my whole life. I mean, my whole life. Even before I knew that there were continents or other countries, I dreamed at night about standing in a place that was unbelievably bright, in tall coarse grass nearly up to my waist. Off to the left would be a shadowy cluster of small gnarly trees.

When I got to Africa, I learned that the grass is called elephant or kuku-u grass and the trees are acacia or fever trees and they often grow in clusters near water.

By the time I turned 53, I was . . . well, slightly more unusual. I decided to leave my real-estate life totally and live in an RV and roam around until I figured out what "work" I really

wanted to do. "Work" here means how I wanted to spend the hours of my life, not necessarily what I would be paid for. They may or may not be the same thing. For those of us who are very fortunate, they do at least overlap. In my life now, there is really no division at all.

I wrote: "My goal is to be alert and present to the richness of each moment, to stay with not knowing as far as I am able, and out of this to find my work. I have faith that what calls me most persistently will engage my best talents and energies in a life that is more simple, less hurried, and more intimately connected."

I delivered a letter to my friends and employees at Prudential, quoting Sarah Ban Breathnach: "If you are determined to gather life's honey, to stick your hand into the hive again and again and again to be stung so many times that you become numb to the pain, to persevere and persist till those who know you and love you become unable to think of you as a fairly normal woman, you will not be called mad. You will be called authentic." That became my particular goal, the name for the thing I yearned for: An authentic life. The life I am best suited to live.

I finally left with Molly the Easily Alarmed Dalmatian in early spring, right after Passover. I pulled out of the drive not knowing if I would turn right or left. Those first three weeks, I was getting used to everything, especially getting used to driving the RV. I was not a natural. It was day nineteen that I finally recorded: "At last! A day without an accident!"

I began to keep a gratitude journal, listing five things a day that I noticed and was thankful for. Lists like:

1. The high meadow yellow with buttercups
2. A long quiet walk in drizzly woods at twilight
3. Dry boots
4. Molasses cookies with hot tea
5. Curious cows

I wrote: "Perhaps I'm not meant to be searching but rather letting go. Letting go of anxiety, letting go of guessing what the future will be. Letting go of working all the time. Letting go of schedules. Letting go of the interminable to-do lists."

I kept trying to relax into the present moment, but 53 years of worrying about being responsible made it hard. I did seem to love each day and I felt that anything might be possible. As I reread the journal to prepare for today, those feelings came alive again.

I had a somewhat parallel experience at my twenty-fifth college reunion in 1991. I had avoided reunions. They seemed a bittersweet attempt to be young again and act silly with old friends. I did not have any of my intimate friends returning to campus that year but I went anyway. The person I met there was myself as a young woman. I glimpsed her on campus and in the classrooms and sitting in the branches of a magnolia tree, dreaming. I was able to access what I hoped for and imagined when I was twenty. And it was delicious to be back in class with my contemporaries. That's a wonderful thing that Duke offers as part of reunions — opportunities during the long weekend to engage with professors in miniaturized popular courses.

Reading my journal, preparing for this morning, not only refreshed memories, it brought me into the kind of emotional space where I had lived for eighteen months, mostly alone in the woods and wild places of this continent. I've been feeling more emotionally receptive, more porous.

I wrote: "I'm sitting here at evening writing by lamplight. Molly is already asleep, Mozart is playing on the stereo and a stream is gurgling nearby. This is heaven. Perhaps truly. I love this beautiful earth with my whole heart."

I wrote: "This week I have tried new things. I have been afraid. I have done them anyway. I have loved this week."

And: "I sure can expand my small chores to consume the entire day. I dally about everything. Am I being 'mindful' or just slow? Was I productive and focused before or just self-importantly busy?"

In my life in real estate, I often had a list of thirty calls to make before going out with clients. Every moment was structured. Seven a.m. until nearly 11 p.m. I had assistants trying to keep the office organized and feeding me the to-do list. Now, my main responsibility might be to unhook the water hose before I drove Rover the RV out of camp. I would fall

asleep saying: "Don't forget the water hose." I would wake up during the night thinking, "It would be bad to forget to undo the hose." Good grief! I mean, if I forgot, I would have to buy a new hose. Probably nothing more. And I was still making a list to be worried about! Even if there was only one thing on it! I had trained myself to worry all the time. Or maybe it is my essential nature.

I also set up a schedule. I just couldn't get comfortable without some kind of daily rhythm. I wrote in my journal in the morning because it was so nice to have my evenings free. Did you hear that? My discipline was to write three pages in my journal and it began to seem like a big deal. I needed to do it early so I could relax. Wherever you go, there you are.

So I would get up and meditate and journal and then drive between 100 and 200 miles. I would stop at a store for food — trying to eat whatever was local — and then find a camp. Then we would walk, Molly and me. We walked two hours a day, at least, coming back to Rover for dinner and reading and more meditation. Each day was so much the same yet each day was completely fresh.

I really love Rover the RV. I loved driving along on blue roads at about thirty miles per hour and I loved being inside her at night. Especially on nights of wind and rain or occasionally snow. I remembered that in childhood I was constantly planning to run away. I was always going to go live in the woods and dig my own cave out of a stream bank. In my very active imagination, it was always a square cave with cheerful curtains at the windows, small and cozy. I realized one night how close I had come to my childhood fantasy and it was as wonderful as I had hoped.

Another gratitude list:

1. The time of long shadows as I walk back to camp
2. The lavender mist that settles over the hills just after sunset
3. Washing my hair in the rain
4. Noticing that I'm not lonely
5. Pea soup

It was in this period that I became a vegetarian. It was my practice to spend time noticing what was on my plate at dinner and thinking about all the lives and all the labor that was part of my food. Consider just the bread. Winter fields fallow, then planted. Sun and rain clouds

and ripening. Harvesting and delivering to granaries. Trains and mills and cooperatives, then more trains. Finally mixing and baking and wrapping and trucking. Then store clerks and checkout personnel and now here it is on my plate. All of that and more, in a slice of bread. How could I not be grateful? Then I would look at the piece of chicken. Knowing how much suffering was in that piece of factory-farmed animal, I just couldn't enjoy it. On the other hand, it is a marker of great privilege that I now eat good protein without animal products. Only wealthy people can do that.

I noticed something else that I believe is particularly important. I was driving north and was able to extend spring for two months. I had early spring in North Carolina and late spring in Nova Scotia. Another privilege. But here is the important piece of noticing. In cold weather, Molly and I would come back to Rover and lock ourselves in for the evening and then I'd have to go out to walk her one more time. Neither of us liked to go. I would have to wake her out of her tight little ball under her own blanket and pathetically shove her outside. It was always kinda scary. Bears? Marauding raccoons? Just the mysterious dark across the threshold of my own closed-off space. As the weather warmed, we would come back to Rover after our evening walk and leave the door open. I could see more stars and hear crickets and tree frogs. There was now no threshold between the outer world and my interior space. I was not afraid. I was not afraid all evening being part of the larger world. Fear came when I separated myself and then had to go out again.

Where else in my life do I experience that?

The more we lock ourselves in and prepare for danger, the more fear we will feel. The more barriers we put up to protect ourselves, the harder it is to cross thresholds.

I thought a lot about fear and what I had learned dealing with all kinds of folks in real estate. Early on, people moving in from New Jersey almost always insisted on alarm systems. People moving around the South typically did not. Over time, that dynamic changed. If you were moneyed, the responsible thing was to have an alarm system. I had been married to a man from New Jersey. We always had an alarm system. I nearly died from it. Well not really, but we also had a St. Bernard, a 160-pound dog named Bambi. She regularly set it off. When I heard the screaming alarm I would hyperventilate and pick up a broom and search through the house, in agony every time I had to open a closed door. It was always the dog.

Once fear gets ahold of us, it is hard to think beyond the need for protection. The incidence of crime in suburban New Jersey and suburban North Carolina is truly not so different. It is the norm for what it is to act responsibly that is different. Being taught to be guarded and wary encourages us to be afraid.

Let me share two wonderful experiences I had in Canada. There were many; these two were about "welcoming the stranger" instead of "playing it safe."

My first night in Nova Scotia, I had trouble finding a place to camp. The Provincial Parks were not yet open and a regular commercial park had gone out of business. I had been wandering a long time when I saw a sign that said "Cottages." Well, it is pretty common on an island for people to try to make a little money on summer tourists, so I figured if they rented cottages, these people would probably be used to having strangers around and they might let me park overnight. I had a pocketful of loonies and toonies to offer to pay. I drove down a long private lane and came to a bluff looking out to sea. Beautiful. I knocked on the door of the only house I saw and discovered that the people who lived there were named (are you ready?) "Cottage." After I got over being flustered and amused, I asked advice for camping. "Oh for heavens sake," they replied, "stay right here. We'll pull out an extension cord for your power and you are welcome to come in and use our phone. Stay as long as you like."

You know, I think in the United States we have the same generosity of spirit, but we're taught to be wary and careful and guarded. More and more. The New Jersey Olders, my in-laws, were never comfortable with my habit of talking with strangers. "You just don't ever know," they said. They were right, but I believe it is worth the risk to keep those scary thresholds from encroaching more and more.

Another night in New Brunswick, Canada, I lingered around a little village and then got lost finding a park. I drove back and forth nearly two hours getting more tired and frustrated. I kept coming to dead ends and having to turn Rover around. You remember how well I drive an RV. Now it was 10 p.m., and finally dark. I saw several lights on at a single house so I stopped and knocked. I was not comfortable. How would you feel if a stranger were to knock on your door at 10 p.m.? I explained how I was turned about and I asked directions. "Stay here, eh?" they said. "Park in the drive. You are quite welcome." In the morning, they knocked on

Rover's door. "We're leaving for work, but we've left the house open," they said. "Take a hot shower. We left clean towels on the counter."

Please chew on this for a while. Bad things happen in Canada. They have thieves and murderers. But the culture is not permeated with fear of the stranger. I think it is worth asking "Why?"

I believe that people here at home are caring and generous and willing to extend themselves in extraordinary ways when they know someone. But in the abstract, we are increasingly trained to be afraid and guarded, to build prisons and watch out for subversive activity and keep a strong militia. It is true that "You never know," and "It's good to be ready" but I believe that it is also true that you often create what you expect. If we expect the worst, we just might be right. This is true on both sides of the political spectrum.

Well, I seemed to have wasted another Sunday morning with my personal story and I haven't gotten to the Unitarian Universalist communities that I visited or how come after all the wandering I ended up in seminary. Stay tuned if you are curious. Sooner or later, I'll tell . . . the rest of the story.

Blessed be.