

**At the Intersection of Social Justice and  
Environmental Action on the Road of Life**  
**By Ellen Thomas**  
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I got to thinking about journeys and how they fit into both our spiritual and our physical lives a few months ago. I was sitting at the fire ring behind the church, doing Meditation in Nature, and I noticed two sounds in particular. First was the call of the White-Throated Sparrow, scratching about in the dead leaves. Does anyone know what the WTS is purported to say? “Oh sweet Canada, Canada, Canada.....” The idea, of course, is that this handsome little brown striped visitor, with its white throat and yellow eye patches, is singing for its summer home, in Canada and northern Minnesota.

Now, I know the song of the WTS well, because I too journey north in the summers, to spend time in Northern Minnesota, and I hear them singing about Canada there, in their summer nesting grounds.

That brings me to the other sound that was prominent that morning—the rising and falling, but constant sound of traffic on Highway 63 over here. That’s the road we take every year to get to the North Woods. In my family, we feel like we have been taking that journey for a long time, since the 1930’s, when my grandparents began going there to escape the August heat of Mid-Missouri. Over those years, the road has changed, getting bigger, and faster and straighter, and the vehicle has changed, also getting bigger and faster, and the journey has become short and fairly direct.

But the White Throated Sparrow has been taking that same journey for who knows how many millennia. Presumably nothing much has changed about its route or its means of travel, although we do know that their numbers have decreased some 65% in my lifetime, although they still have a robust and non-endangered population.

And so that is one example of two physical journeys in the world today, one an example of the common story of migration in natural systems, the other the physical journey, using the tools available to modern humans, for the benefit and pleasure of a particular family of people.

This annual journey is incredibly important to me because the trip to Northern Minnesota is a key part of who I am, and of my spiritual growth, which is very wrapped up, for me, with time in nature.

And it is clear that the journeys, both real and metaphorical are very common in origin stories and religious beliefs. For example, the people native to the summer grounds of the White-throated sparrow, the Anishinaabe, tell the story of their migration from the Eastern woodlands to “the place where food grows on water,” referring to wild rice. The Haj is important to Islam, Jews tell the story of the 40 years in the wilderness of the Israelites after the exodus from Egypt. In Christianity,

Jesus was born “on the road,” as his young mother travelled with her husband, and there are many journey stories that are important to understanding Christianity, such as the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus, and the story of the Good Samaritan, which also occurs on a journey.

We UU's often think of our religion as one of spiritual quest or journey, something that I think is particularly reflected in our 4<sup>th</sup> Principle, “we affirm and promote the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Our story today was adapted from the writings of our Unitarian predecessor, Henry David Thoreau, and in it, I think he addresses one of the key questions about the meaning of journeys in religion. That question is, which matters more, the destination, or the journey itself?

Religious traditions which emphasize an afterlife or an ultimate reward, while considering the journey important, would most likely come down on the side of the destination being the important thing. I think it is fair to say that the majority of UU's would come down on the side of the journey, or how we get to our spiritual understanding and our role in the world, as more important than a final endpoint.

Thoreau, in his tale of the journey to Fitchburg, is of course talking about a real life physical journey, but I think he is telling us something about the quality of how we spend our time. Since the time of Thoreau, journeys have become even more integral to our daily lives. I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that our lives are an ongoing series of journeys from destination to destination, with the destination itself being the only thing of value to us. The trip itself is some combination of time-management nightmare and annoyance with our fellow travellers.

So isn't that interesting? That a group of people who probably would ascribe high value to the process of the journey in our religious or spiritual lives, actually physically do the opposite in our daily lives?

I'm actually going to take that even further, and say that the way we travel often reflects the very values of our society that we are least likely to celebrate. We have roads that are paid for by everyone, but of most benefit to the wealthy. The rules of our parking lots are: If you get there first, take the best space—except for the relatively few we have set aside for those with disabilities or visitors. The functional rules of our roads are similar. They are built for people in cars with little or no accommodation for those on foot, bicycle or in a wheelchair. The state of Missouri spends 9 cents per person on public transportation, and nothing at all on pedestrian facilities. The federal government is a bit better, putting a couple of percent of the transportation budget into the alternatives to the private car that our citizens who are too young or old to drive, who have physical disabilities such as visual impairment or epilepsy, or who can't afford a car, must use, and which others might choose to use.

Of course, this is a Green Sanctuary service, and I could bring up lots of environmental reasons that our transportation system could be improved, from carbon emissions to run-off, to habitat loss, and those reasons do grieve me, but I am on a journey of learning about the incredible implications for social justice that result from not understanding racial history and its effects on systems. And part of that for me is seeing the pattern in environmental issues as well. As Julian Agyman, Professor of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts University says, ““Sustainability cannot be simply a ‘green’, or ‘environmental’ concern, important though ‘environmental’ aspects of sustainability are. A truly sustainable society is one where wider questions of social needs and welfare, and economic opportunity are integrally related to environmental limits imposed by supporting ecosystems”

Which brings me to the transportation issue that I think, in the week after Chris Crass’s visit, we need to know more about and really take on board. I hadn’t thought much about how Highway 63, or any of the other roads I travel transitioned from the windy 2-lane roads of my father’s childhood to the behemoths they are today.

Diane Rehm, on NPR, recently interviewed Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx, an African American man who grew up between interstates in what was left of his grandparents’ community after their construction, as well several experts on the history of the highway system in America. One, Richard Rothstein, an analyst at the Economic Policy Institute, said (**this is an excerpted quote, but is not correctly punctuated to reflect that**):

“The highways have to be seen in the context of other federal policies that were specifically designed to segregate metropolitan areas. For example, the Federal Housing Administration, beginning in the New Deal and shortly after World War II, suburbanized the white population specifically. The Federal Housing Administration gave loans to mass production builders of suburbs to get the white population out of cities and into suburban areas.

African-Americans were prohibited from moving into these areas and so they became more and more overcrowded in urban areas, not having housing options outside the central city ghettos. Once they were overcrowded by these federal policies, by the prohibition on them moving out into white communities, that then became the excuse for demolishing slums. So the slums were created by public policy, and then, the Bureau of Public Roads, built these highways to demolish, to clear the areas of slums.

It was actually quite explicit. The chief lobbyist behind the federal highway bill in 1956 was a fellow named Alfred Johnson who was the executive director of the American Association of State Highway Officials. And he said later, in reflecting on how he had gotten the interstate highway system built, he said that "city officials

expressed the view in the mid 1950s that the urban interstates would give them a good opportunity to get rid of the local n-town."

Well. That was eye-opening for me, and brought to mind something we can see right here in Columbia. There was a recent dedication of a plaque on the site of the former "Sharp End" black business district. I don't want to overstate it, because there were decades in between, but what is there now? A huge structure for the temporary storage of a few hundred cars—the parking garage across from the Post Office.

- Another interview was with **Sherrilyn Ifill**, president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. Here's what she had to say:(again, excerpted)

"You know, last spring, when Baltimore was engaged in this unrest, people were looking at a four block radius in Baltimore. And they wanted to understand what happened here. How did West Baltimore get to be this way? What was Freddie Gray's Baltimore? Why was that CVS burning? But they weren't going to pull the thread off of all the decisions that contributed to that moment.

And one set of those decisions has to do with transportation policy in Baltimore. It has to do with the isolation of communities in West Baltimore that really have no means of -- the parents have no means to get to the jobs on the outer edges of the city. To go five miles in Baltimore City, on the bus, takes over an hour.

.If you get up really early in Baltimore at five in the morning, when it's still dark, and you go out in West Baltimore and you look at the bus stops, you will see women standing on the bus stops in their nursing smocks, waiting for the bus to go to those jobs at Johns Hopkins on the eastern edge of the city. They're out there at five 'o clock in the morning, even though their shift doesn't start until seven. What does that mean for their children who now have to go to school on their own, who maybe didn't have breakfast. Who maybe didn't get their homework finished the night before, because the mom got home late.

We have lots of judgments about who those children are and who their moms are, but we're not there at five in the morning watching what it takes just to get to work in a major American city.

And as a pediatrician, I can tell you that there is a legacy of higher lead levels in the children who must play in the dirt contaminated by leaded gasoline years ago, and there are still high rates of asthma related to proximity to heavily travelled roads.

lfill also points out that it isn't just urban: (yep, excerpted again!)

- “This is not only a matter for the cities. I first became engaged with this issue on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in the mid-1990s, when there was a plan to build a bypass out to Ocean City adjacent to an African-American community. It turned out it had been the third time in 60 years that this African-American community either had a highway built through it or directly adjacent to it. (This is) a community that has been literally bifurcated...cut in half, with churches hanging on one side and residences on another side, in order to built this highway out to the beach. The irony, of course, is that when these highways were being built, African-Americans were not even allowed to actually be at Ocean City except on one prescribed day in September.”

So we are living with, and continuing to build, a transportation system that favors the able and the affluent, with costs that impact those who benefit the least, the most. When we speak of an interconnected web of all existence, this is what I think we mean—we are connected with the environment through our use of resources, if nothing else, and at the same time, the way we use resources affects others. It affects the great migrations—natural journeys of monarch butterflies, white-throated sparrows, caribou, whales and more, and it affects other people, those nearby who can't access our transportation system equally, and those far away who will suffer most from climate change and pollution.

To the extent that we have tried to address this so far, it has been buy building more roads, and trying to get more people in cars, but if we look at this from any kind of big-picture or long-term lens, we have to see that that is doomed to fail. Not only does it result in mounting environmental costs, but it creates an expanding spiral of economic inequality. Transportation costs increase from 9 % of the household budget in economically constrained families who have access to transit or can walk to work, to 25% if a similar family lives in an auto-dependent area. Each new car added to our national fleet generates demand for 6 new parking spaces, spreading the city out further, and further disadvantaging those unable to drive. I also think that there is a social cost in terms of fear and othering when the affluent enclose

themselves in cars, and only see others slogging along the shoulder of the highway, or huddled at bus-stops for which we have decided it is too expensive to provide shelters or clear snow.

And so I am leaving you today with a challenge. Some time in the month of May, if you are able, try taking a journey by another means that you would normally take by car. And as you are doing that, or thinking about doing it, consider how you feel about it. Does it seem too dangerous? Too inconvenient? What if it were your only option? Would you be able to work where you work, or live where you live, without the private automobile? In what activities or events, for yourself or your children, would you be unable to participate? What do the answers to these questions mean for opportunity in our community?

There's another side to this challenge though. You may find that journeys you take on foot or bike, or carpool or by transit, have benefits you never imagined. I know that when I bike to church, I arrive a little sweaty and disheveled, but also invigorated by the exercise, the conversation if I biked with friends, or the sights and sounds, smells and sensations of nature on my travels.

Green Sanctuary is again issuing our "Travel a Different Path" challenge in May and there is information on the little cards on your seat today, and more information in the greeting area. So I hope you will consider participating.

When I began working on this homily, I titled it "At the Intersection of Social Justice and Environmental Activism on the Road of Life," but now I have changed my mind. I no longer see this is an intersection, but as two lanes of the same road.

I am going to close now with a final quote from Julian Agyeman:

**"In recent years it has become increasingly apparent that the issue of environmental quality is inextricably linked to that of human equality. Wherever in the world environmental despoilation and degradation is happening, it is almost always linked to questions of social justice, equity, rights and people's quality of life in its widest sense."**